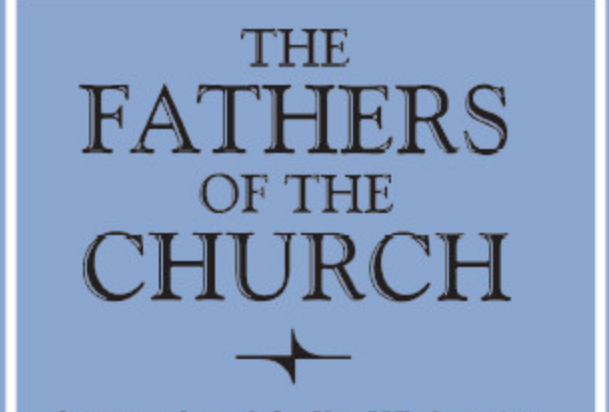
THE
FATHERS
OF THE
CHURCH
SAINT GREGORY THE GREAT
DIALOGUES
Translated by Odo John Zimmerman, O.S.B.

THE FATHERS OF THE CHURCH

A NEW TRANSLATION

VOLUME 39

THE FATHERS OF THE CHURCH

A NEW TRANSLATION

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SAINT GREGORY THE GREAT

DIALOGUES

Translated by

ODO JOHN ZIMMERMAN, O. S. B.

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INTRODUCTION

GREGORY THE GREAT (540?-604) is one of the strong men whom God raises up periodically to guide His Church and her members through periods of crises. His social and intellectual background and his spiritual formation prepared him well for the work awaiting him as supreme shepherd of God's flock.

When he was about thirty-five years old, he resigned from the high political office held, as Prefect of Rome, to enter religious life. He founded six monasteries on his estates in Sicily and turned his own home on the Caelian Hill in Rome into the Monastery of St. Andrew. Then, after distributing the rest of his wealth among the poor, he entered St. Andrew's as an ordinary monk and lived there under the Rule of St. Benedict, which he was later to praise for its discretion.

In 578 Pope Benedict I ordained him one of the seven deacons of Rome, and the next year Pope Pelagius II sent him as nuncio to the imperial court at Constantinople, where he remained for six years. Shortly after his return to Rome, be became abbot of St. Andrew's and five years later, when Pelagius II died, the clergy and people of Rome elected him Pope.

During a pontificate (590-604) which kept him very active in administering the temporalities of the Church, he was ever deeply concerned with the temporal and eternal welfare of his people. He had them in mind in particular when he wrote the *Dialogues,* the first three books of which contain accounts of the lives and miracles of various Italian saints, and the fourth an essay on the immortality of the soul.

It is clear from the general preface in Book 1 that St. Gregory's chief reason for writing the *Dialogues* was to honor the memory of the saints of Italy and to edify and instruct his fellow countrymen. He wanted them to realize that they were living in a land of saints and that great miracles were as numerous among the Fathers of Italy as they had been among the Fathers of the Desert and elsewhere. The book was also written to comfort and encourage the people of Italy during one of the most disheartening periods of their history. The wars between the Emperor Justinian and the barbarian Goths for the mastery of the country had left much of it a wilderness. Men and women had to live in constant dread of the savage Lombard hordes that swept down into Italy in 568 and were still slaying and pillaging wherever they turned. Floods and plagues and a long series of famines added to the general gloom. Many even felt that the final destruction of the world was at hand. After reading in the first three books of *Dialogues* about the many striking miracles performed in their very midst, they would no longer question God's unfailing protection of His people. Then in Book 4 St. Gregory endeavored to strengthen their faith in the unseen hereafter by proving that the soul does not perish with the body and can look forward to eternal happiness.

Gregory presented his material in the form of a dialogue, a literary device quite common among the pagan classical authors as well as among the Fathers of the Church. The

discussions take place between the author and his deacon Peter, and, as in the case of many earlier 'dialogues,' the leading speaker completely dominates the conversation. He did not employ this literary form, however, merely as a means of interrupting his narrative from time to time and of adding a note of informality. Peter's remarks and suggestions, his questions and doubts, were designed to give Pope Gregory an opportunity to draw spiritual lessons for his readers from the incidents narrated. These digressions have great doctrinal value and contain the practical moral reflections for which St. Gregory is so famous.

Very likely, Peter was also meant to be a spokesman for the members of the papal household, giving expression to the interest and enthusiasm with which they had watched the Pope compiling his narrative. For, as St. Gregory mentioned in a letter to Maximian,[1] Bishop of Syracuse, it was in answer to their urgent requests that he had originally decided to write about the saints of Italy.

From this letter, too, we know that St. Gregory was busy writing the *Dialogues* in the summer of 593. Perhaps the work was nearing completion at the time, for he asked Maximian to hurry and send the story about Abbot Nonnosus and any other details that might be of interest. Very probably, then, much of the material to be published was already at hand. The members of the papal household would hardly have urged him to write these lives had they not previously heard many of them from his own lips. As spiritual father, St. Gregory was in the habit of instructing his household in asceticism as he had done during his mission at Constantinople and later as abbot of St. Andrew's. These instructions, no doubt, were enlivened by vivid narratives from the lives

1 *Epistolas* 3.50 (edd. Ewald-Hartmann, MGH Epist. 1 206).

of the saints of Italy, so that his audience became enthusiastic enough to urge him to publish them. With materials ready at hand, it was quite possible for the Pope to complete the publication of the *Dialogues* in the fall of 593 or shortly thereafter.

The present translation is based on the text given in Moricca's critical edition of the *Dialogues*. The Douay Version is used for Scriptural citations from those books of the Old Testament not yet available in the Confraternity Version. New Testament quotations are from Monsignor Ronald Knox's translation. Exceptions are indicated in the footnotes.

The translator wishes to express his indebtedness to Reverend Benedict Avery, O.S.B., of Saint John's Abbey, for reading the manuscript and offering valuable suggestions, and especially for his work as co-author of the translation of Book 2, *Life and Miracles of Saint Benedict* (Collegeville, Minnesota 1949) which is here reprinted with some slight changes.

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SAINT GREGORY THE GREAT

DIALOGUES

Translated by

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BOOK ONE

SOME MEN OF THE WORLD had left me feeling quite depressed one day with all their noisy wrangling. In their business dealings they try, as a rule, to make us pay what we obviously do not owe them. In my grief I retired to a quiet spot congenial to my mood, where I could consider every unpleasant detail of my daily work and review all the causes of my sorrow as they crowded unhindered before my eyes.

I sat there for a long time in silence and was still deeply dejected when my dear son, the deacon Peter, came in. He had been a very dear friend to me from his early youth and was my companion in the study of sacred Scripture. Seeing me so sick at heart he asked, 'Have you met with some new misfortune? You seem unusually sad.'

'Peter,' I replied, 'this daily sadness of mine is always old and always new: old by its constant presence, new by its continual increase. With my unhappy soul languishing under a burden of distractions, I recall those earlier days in the monastery where all the fleeting things of time were in a world below me, and I could rise far above the vanities of

life. Heavenly thoughts would fill my mind, and while still held within the body I passed beyond its narrow confines in contemplation. Even death, which nearly everyone regards as evil, I cherished as the entrance into life and the reward for labor.

'But now all the beauty of that spiritual repose is gone, and the contact with worldly men and their affairs, which is a necessary part of my duties as bishop, has left my soul defiled with earthly activities. I am so distracted with external occupations in my concern for the people that even when my spirit resumes its striving after the interior life it always does so with less vigor. Then, as I compare what I have lost with what I must now endure, the contrast only makes my present lot more burdensome. I am tossed about on the waves of a heavy sea, and my soul is like a helpless ship buffeted by raging winds. When I recall my former way of life, it is as though I were once more looking back toward land and sighing as I beheld the shore. It only saddens me the more to find that, while flung about by the mighty waves that carry me along, I can hardly catch sight any longer of the harbor I have left.

'Such, in fact, is generally the way our mind declines. First we lose a prized possession but remain aware of the loss; then as we go along even the remembrance of it fades, and so at the end we are unable any longer to recall what was once actually in our possession. That is why, as I have said, when we sail too far from shore, we can no longer see the peaceful harbor we have left. At times I find myself reflecting with even greater regret on the life that others lead who have totally abandoned the present world. Seeing the heights these men have reached only makes me realize the lowly state of my own soul. It was by spending their days in

seclusion that most of them pleased their Creator. And to keep them from dulling their spiritual fervor with human activities, God chose to leave them free from worldly occupations.'

And now I think it will be best if I present the conversation that took place between us by simply putting our names before the questions and the answers we exchanged.

PETER

I do not know of any persons in Italy whose lives give evidence of extraordinary spiritual powers, and therefore I cannot imagine with whom you are comparing yourself so regretfully. This land of ours has undoubtedly produced its virtuous men, but to my knowledge no signs or miracles have been performed by any of them; or, if they have been, they were till now kept in such secrecy that we cannot even tell if they occurred.

GREGORY

On the contrary, Peter, the day would not be long enough for me to tell you about those saints whose holiness has been well established and whose lives are known to me either from my own observations or from the reports of good, reliable witnesses.

PETER

Would you do me the favor, then, of saying at least something about them? Interrupting the study and explanation of the Scriptures for such a purpose should not cause grave

concern, for the amount of edification to be gained from a description of miracles is just as great. An explanation of holy Scripture teaches us how to attain virtue and persevere in it, whereas a description of miracles shows us how this acquired virtue reveals itself in those who persevere in it. Then, too, the lives of the saints are often more effective than mere instruction for inspiring us to love heaven as our home. Hearing about their example will generally be helpful in two ways. In the first place, as we compare ourselves with those who have gone before, we are filled with a longing for the future life; secondly, if we have too high an opinion of our own worth, it makes us humble to find that others have done better.

GREGORY

I shall not hesitate to narrate what I have learned from worthy men. In this I am only following the consecrated practice of the Scriptures, where it is perfectly clear that Mark and Luke composed their Gospels, not as eyewitnesses, but on the word of others. Nevertheless, to remove any grounds for doubt on the part of my readers, I am going to indicate on whose authority each account is based. You should bear in mind, however, that in some instances I retain only the substance of the original narrative; in others, the words as well. For if I had always kept to the exact wording, the crude language used by some would have been ill suited to my style of writing. The following narrative I obtained from elderly men who are highly respected.

(1) On the estate of the late Senator Venantius, in the district of Samnium, lived a tenant whose son Honoratus, when only a boy, had cultivated a deep love for his heavenly

home by the practice of abstinence. As he advanced in virtue he curbed his tongue from idle talk, and his abstinence from meat enabled him to gain mastery over his flesh. One day his father and mother invited their neighbors to dinner. When the meat was served, Honoratus would not take any, preferring to continue in his self-denial. His parents began to laugh at him and asked, 'Why can't you eat what is set before you? Do you expect us to have fish up here in the mountains?' For where they were living fish was not to be had.

Just then the supply of water for the meal gave out. So, as was customary there, a servant took a wooden bucket to the spring to get some. As it was filling it a fish slipped in. When he got back and poured out the water in the presence of all, to their amazement they saw the fish, which was large enough to supply Honoratus with food for an entire day. His parents did not say another word in derision but instead were filled with esteem for his abstinence. Thus the man of God was cleared of dishonor and ridicule by the discovery of a fish in that mountainous region.

His unusual progress in holiness and the miracles he performed soon led Venantius to grant him his freedom. Honoratus then built a monastery at Fondi, where he was abbot of nearly 200 monks and edified the entire countryside by his saintly life.

One time, for example, a huge mass of rock had broken loose from the mountain that towered high above the monastery and, as it rolled down, threatened to demolish the buildings and kill the monks. The holy abbot raised his right hand toward it and with the sign of the cross opposed its fall, all the while invoking the name of Christ. By so doing, as the devout Lawrence assured me, he stopped it where it was on the steep mountainside. Today the huge rock still appears

to be on the verge of rolling down, for nothing can be seen there that would block its fall.

PETER

I should think this saintly man would have needed someone to instruct him before he could become a spiritual guide for others.

GREGORY

As far as I know he had no one, but then, the gift of the Holy Spirit is not restricted by any law. According to sound monastic practice, a person should not presume to become a superior until he has learned submission; if he does not know how to obey, he should not be requiring obedience of others. Yet there are times when the Spirit directs a soul entirely from within. In such cases the guidance of this divine Teacher supplies for the absence of any human instruction. Weaker souls, however, must not try to imitate this freedom in their own lives. For if, on the vain presumption that they, too, are filled with the Holy Spirit, they refuse to be guided by another human being, they will only become teachers of error. The soul that is really filled with the Spirit of God will easily be recognized by its miraculous powers and humility. Where these two signs of holiness are found to perfection they show beyond a doubt that God is truly present. John the Baptist, for example, did not have an instructor, either, as far as we can tell from sacred Scripture. Even the divine Master, who is Truth Itself, did not make John one of His disciples as He did the Apostles, whom He taught through His human presence. Instead, Christ left him free of these

external ties and continued to instruct him by divine inspiration. Moses, too, after being taught in the desert, received instructions from an angel, not from a human being.[1] But, as I said before, examples like these are rather to be admired by weaker souls than imitated.

PETER

I am glad you discussed that point. Tell me, though, did any of the saint's disciples later follow in his footsteps?

GREGORY

(2) There was Libertinus, a highly respected man. He had lived as a disciple under Honoratus and received his training from him. Later, in the time of King Totila, he became prior of the the monastery of Fondi. Although the numerous miracles ascribed to him by many trustworthy men are commonly known, I will add a few that I heard from the devout Lawrence whom I mentioned previously. This Lawrence is still alive and tells me a great deal about Libertinus, for the two had been intimate friends at Fondi. The following incident just occurs to me.

Libertinus once was going through Samnium, taking care of some business matters for the monastery. When Darida, a Gothic commander, came to the same region with his army, some of his men, seeing Libertinus riding past, made him dismount and robbed him even of his horse. Far from showing any resentment at the loss of the animal, the saintly man offered them his rider's whip, also, saying, 'Here, take

1 Cf. Exod. 23.20-23.

this, too. You will need it to drive the horse.' Then he knelt down to pray.

The soldiers rode off at a rapid pace and soon came to the Volturno River. There the horses came to a stop and would not go down to the water, even though the riders struck them with their lances and dug their spurs into their flanks until the blood flowed. Spurs and whips were useless. A plunge down a fatal precipice would not have seemed more terrifying to the horses. After the soldiers had worked themselves into a state of exhaustion with these useless efforts, one of them remarked that they were suffering this setback because of the wrong they had done to the man of God. Without further delay they turned back to find Libertinus. He was still on his knees praying. To their demands that he get up and take his horse, he answered, 'Go in peace. I have no need of a horse.' But they dismounted, lifted the protesting prior back onto his own horse and rode off again. This time, when they reached the banks of the Volturno, the horses dashed through the water as though the river bed were completely dry. And so, after this one stolen horse had been given back to its rightful master, all the soldiers again received full mastery over their own horses.

It was during these years, too, that Buccelin[2] with his Franks arrived in Campania. They heard rumors that Libertinus had large sums of money hidden away in his monastery at Fondi. So, breaking into the chapel, they began angrily to shout his name, not knowing that he was lying prostrate in prayer on the chapel floor. The remarkable thing is that in their mad search they kept stumbling against him without been able to see him. Frustrated in their blindness, they left the monastery empty-handed.

2 He had entered Italy in 553.

At another time his abbot, the successor of Honoratus, asked him to go to Ravenna to take care of some business matters for the monastery. Now, out of veneration for his saintly master, Libertinus had made it a practice never to go anywhere without carrying on his person one of Honoratus' sandals. On his way to Ravenna it happened that he met a woman carrying her dead child in her arms. She looked at the man of God and, acting on the impulse of her maternal love, seized his horse by the bridle. Then, invoking the name of God, she solemnly declared, 'You shall not pass until you have brought my son back to life!'

Libertinus, considering such a thing most unusual, was frightened at the oath in her petition. To complete his confusion, he discovered that he could not turn out of her way, try as he would. One can readily imagine the struggle that went on his heart where the habitual humility of his life now came face to face with the devotedness of a mother. Fear kept him from attempting to fulfill a request so unusual, while a feeling of compassion kept urging him to help the mother in her bereavement. But, thanks be to God, the pious mother was victorious in this struggle, and the saint, in being overcome, gave proof of real strength. For, if the devotion of the mother had not been able to conquer his heart, how could he have been a man of true virtue? So he dismounted, knelt down, and raised his hands to heaven. Then, taking the sandal from the folds of his garment, he placed it on the breast of the dead child and, as he continued praying, the boy came back to life. Libertinus took him by the hand and gave him back to his weeping mother. After that he continued on his way to Ravenna.

PETER

How can you explain this great miracle? Did the merits of Honoratus cause it or the prayers of Libertinus?

GREGORY

It was the virtue of both, combined with the woman's faith, that produced this striking miracle. And it is my conviction that Libertinus was able to perform such a deed because he had learned to put greater trust in his master's powers than in his own. Undoubtedly he realized that his prayer had been answered through the spirit of Honoratus, whose sandal he had placed on the dead child's breast. Did not the Prophet Eliseus in like manner have with him the mantle of Elias, his master, when he came to the Jordan? He struck the waters but they did not part. So he quickly exclaimed, 'Where is now the God of Elias?[3] And striking the river with the mantle, he opened up a pathway through its waters. Now you see, Peter, how important humility is for working miracles. Only when he called upon his master's name and returned to his humble position as a disciple, could he exercise his master's powers and share in his marvelous deeds.

PETER

This is very interesting. Are there, perhaps, some other edifying incidents in his life that you might tell us?

3 4 Kings 2.14.

GREGORY

There are, indeed. But who is willing to imitate them? The virtue of patience they exemplify is, to my mind, greater than the power of working miracles. One day the abbot who succeeded Honoratus in the government of the monastery broke out in violent anger against Libertinus. Not finding a rod, he seized a footstool and struck Libertinus on the head and face, leaving them swollen and disfigured. In spite of the bruises, the saintly man retired to his bed without a word.

Arrangements, however, had been made for him to take care of some business for the monastery the next day. So, after the morning office, Libertinus came to the abbot's bed and humbly asked for the blessing. The abbot, realizing the great honor and esteem this monk enjoyed in the community and suspecting that the unjust treatment was causing him to leave, asked him where he was going.

'To take care of the business matters we arranged yesterday,' answered Libertinus. 'I promised to do it today, and I should now like to go and fulfill my obligation.'

After reflecting deeply upon his own harshness and severity and upon the humility and gentleness of Libertinus, the abbot rose quickly from his cot, knelt at the feet of his monk and humbly confessed that he was guilty of sin for having inflicted cruel injuries on a holy man. But Libertinus cast himself to the ground and protested that the bruises were due to his own faults and not the result of the abbot's severity. This incident turned out to be a lesson in humility for the abbot, who thereafter became a most gentle superior.

On his way to settle the business at hand, Libertinus met some of his friends and admirers who were much alarmed

at his condition and asked the reason for the bruises. Resolved to remain truthful and at the same time conceal the abbot's weakness, Libertinus answered, 'Yesterday evening my own sinfulness caused me to strike my face against a footstool. As a result you see these swellings.' And so without telling a lie he saved the abbot's good name.

PETER

After hearing all the miracles you relate of Libertinus, is it not quite natural to suppose that there were some in this large community to imitate his virtuous life?

GREGORY

(3) Surely you remember Felix, the hunchback. He was prior of the monastery a short time ago. I recall many of the remarkable stories he used to tell me about the monks there. But I must leave them unsaid and get on with other matters. There is one, however, that I must not pass over in silence.

At the monastery there was a very saintly man who acted as gardener. Now a thief used to come regularly and climb over the fence and steal his vegetables. Since the holy monk planted many vegetables which he could not find later, and noticed that some were trampled underfoot while others were stolen, he made a tour of inspection through the whole garden and found the place where the thief used to enter. On continuing his inspection, he found a serpent and commanded it to follow him. When he came to the thief's place of entrance he said, 'In the name of Jesus Christ I charge you to guard this entrance and keep the thief out.'

Immediately, the serpent stretched itself full length across the path, and the monk returned to the monastery.

During the noon hour while all were resting, the thief came as usual. He climbed the fence and just as he was going to put his foot down into the garden, he saw the serpent lying in his way. Terrified at the sight, he fell backwards over the fence. But his shoe got caught in the pickets so that he hung there, head downwards, unable to right himself. When the gardener returned he found him in this awkward position. But before turning to the thief, the saintly monk spoke to the serpent. 'Thanks be to God,' he said. 'You did just as I told you. Now you may go.' And the serpent crawled away. Then going to the thief, he said, 'What has happened here, brother? It is God who has delivered you into my hands. How did you dare to come so often to steal the fruits of our monastic labor?' With this he loosed the shoe from the picket and let the thief gently to the ground. 'Follow me,' he then told him and led the way to the entrance. There he graciously gave him the vegetables he had been trying to steal. 'Go, now,' he said, 'and do not steal again. If you have need of vegetables, come to me here in the garden and I will give you with God's blessing what you are wrongly trying to get by theft.'

PETER

I see now how unfounded my previous impression was that Italy had no wonder-workers.

GREGORY

Fortunatus, the saintly abbot of the monastery known as Cicero's Bath, and some other holy men are the sources for the following account.

(4) A most devout man by the name of Equitius, of the province of Valeria, was held in highest esteem by all because of his great holiness. For this reason, too, he had been made abbot over many monasteries of that province. Fortunatus was well acquainted with him. Finding himself much distressed as a young man by violent temptations of the flesh, Equitius turned with all the greater zeal to fervent prayer. One night while he was earnestly begging God for aid in this matter, he saw himself made a eunuch while an angel stood by. Through this vision he realized that all disturbances of the flesh had been taken away, and from that time on he was a complete stranger to temptations of this kind as though his body were no longer subject to the tendencies of human nature.

Relying on this virtue, which God had helped him to acquire, he took upon himself the guidance of communities of women just as he had done of monks. Yet he warned his disciples to be distrustful of themselves and not to be too eager to follow his example, for they would be the cause of their own downfall in trying to do what God had not given them the power to do.

At the time when certain magicians were put under arrest in Rome, Basil, whose skill in magic arts was surpassed by none, fled to Valeria disguised as a monk. There he approached the revered Castorius, Bishop of Amiternum, and asked to be placed under the care of Abbot Equitius with a recommendation for entrance into his community. So the

bishop, taking Basil with him, went to the monastery and asked Equitius to accept him as a member of his community. After one glance at Basil the holy abbot said, 'Father, the man whom you recommend looks to me like a devil and not a monk.'

To this the bishop answered, 'You are trying to find an excuse to refuse my request.'

'No,' quickly replied the abbot, 'I am only describing this person as I see him. But that you may not think me unwilling to obey, I will do as you command.' And so Basil was received into the monastery.

A few days later the man of God went a greater distance than usual from the monastery on his missionary journey urging the faithful to turn their hearts Godward. During his absence, a nun in one of the convents under his care, a person endowed with a beauty that corrupts with the flesh, took sick, and a high fever caused her to become extremely restless. She no longer confined herself to loud shouting but became hysterical. 'I am going to die,' she kept calling, 'unless the monk Basil comes immediately to cure me.'

In the absence of their saintly abbot the monks would not let anyone of the community go to the convent, least of all this new arrival whose manner of life they did not yet know. Instead they quickly sent a message to Equitius, informing him that this nun was ill with a high fever and anxiously demanding a visit from the monk Basil. The abbot listened to the messenger and gave his answer with a knowing smile: 'I always said he was a devil and not a monk. Go and bid him leave the monastery. About the nun who was sick and hysterical you need not worry. The fever has left her now and she is no longer asking for Basil.'

The monk returned and discovered that the nun had been cured when the words of healing were spoken.

In this act Equitius followed the example of his divine Master, who, when invited to attend the ruler's son, restored him to health by a word, so that the father went home and found that his son had been healed the same hour at which he had heard from Christ Himself the life-giving words.[4]

In obedience to the abbot's command, the monks with one accord expelled Basil from the monastery. Later on, this imposter declared that through his magic arts he had frequently suspended Equitius' monastery in mid-air, but had never been able to injure any of his monks. Not long after, he was burned to death as a magician as a result of the fervent zeal of the Christian people of Rome.

One day a nun of this same convent, on entering the garden, found some lettuce there which appealed to her taste. Forgetting to say the customary blessing, she began to eat of it greedily. Immediately the Devil threw her to the ground in a fit of pain. The other nuns, seeing her in agony, quickly sent word to Abbot Equitius to come with all speed and help them with his prayers. As soon as the holy man entered the garden, the Devil, using the nun's voice, began to justify himself. 'I haven't done anything!' he kept shouting. 'I haven't done anything! I was sitting here on the lettuce when she came and ate me!'

Full of indignation, the man of God commanded him to depart and vacate the place he held in this handmaid of almighty God. The Devil did so at once and after that could no longer exercise his powers over her.

A nobleman from Norcia by the name of Felix, the father of Castorius who is now with us here at Rome, noticed that

4 Cf. John 4.50.

Equitius was not in holy orders, yet traveled about from one place to another preaching the Gospel most zealously. Because they were good friends, Felix one day asked him how he dared to preach, since he was not in holy orders and did not have permission from the Bishop of Rome under whose jurisdiction he was.

Obliged to answer so direct a question, the holy man explained how he had been authorized to preach. 'I have considered well,' he said, 'all the objections you are raising. But one night a young man of radiant beauty appeared to me in a vision and placed a lancet on my tongue and said, "Behold, I have put my words in your mouth. Go forth and preach."[5] Since that day I could not be silent about God even if I so wished.'

PETER

I should like to know the miracles performed by this man so blessed with God's grace.

GREGORY

The deed depends on the gift and not the gift on the deed; otherwise, grace would no longer be grace. Gifts precede every deed, even though the gifts may be increased by the deed that follows. But that you may not be kept from knowing this holy man's life, I refer you to Albinus, the esteemed Bishop of Rieti, who is well acquainted with it. There are also a number of other persons who could inform you.

But why do you look for more deeds when the purity of

5 Cf. Isa. 51.16; 59.21.

his life was as remarkable as the fervor of his preaching? The zeal that burned within him to harvest souls for God was strong enough to enable him to govern his monasteries and to find time, besides, for preaching in the churches of the surrounding hamlets and villages and for visiting even private dwellings, everywhere turning the hearts of the faithful to love their eternal heavenly home. His attire was poor and mean. Anyone who did not recognize him might pass him by without so much as returning his greeting. Whenever he went out to preach, he would ride the poorest beast the monastery possessed. Instead of a bridle he used a halter, and sheepskins served for saddle. Two leather pouches, in which he carried the books of sacred Scripture, hung down from his shoulders on either side. Whenever he arrived at a place, he would open these books and from the fountains of their spiritual doctrine would refresh the minds and souls of his hearers.

Rumors of his reputation for preaching reached Rome. Soon the clergy of that city began to complain. In words of flattery that corrupt those who listen to their charms, they said to the Pope, 'Who is this rustic who presumes authority to preach? Ignorant as he is, he dares to usurp a right reserved for you alone, our apostolic Lord. If it so please you, let an order be issued for him to come to Rome where he will learn to understand the discipline of the Church.'

Flattery, if it is not immediately cast from the mind, easily captivates the soul of one who is preoccupied with a multitude of affairs. And so the Pope, at the persuasion of the clergy, gave his consent to have Equitius summoned to Rome that he might learn to limit his preaching properly.

Julian, who was protector[6] of the Church rights at the

6 An ecclesiastical official who acted as spokesman for the Church when its rights were in question.

time, and later Bishop of Sabina, was sent to carry out the command. The Pope gave him special orders to conduct Equitius to Rome with the respect due a man of God and not to let him suffer any ill treatment because of the summons. Eager to comply promptly with the wishes of the clergy in regard to Equitius, Julian hurried off. Arriving at the monastery, he found the scribes busy at their work, but the abbot himself was not there. When he asked for Abbot Equitius he was told that he was down in the valley directly below the monastery, cutting hay.

Now, Julian had among his servants a proud and insolent fellow whom he himself could manage only with difficulty. And this was the one he chose to go quickly and summon the abbot. Hastening to the meadow in a fierce mood, he found all the monks busy cutting hay. At his demand to see Abbot Equitius, the monks pointed him out. But no sooner had he caught sight of the man of God in the distance than the servant felt himself overcome by an unusual fear. In fact, he became weak with terror and could hardly keep from sinking to the ground. Coming to the man of God in this condition he humbly threw his arms around the abbot's knees, kissed them and announced that his master had come to see him.

The abbot greeted him in turn and said, 'Take some fresh hay with you for the horses. As you see, there is still a little work to be done. I will follow you as soon as it is finished.'

At the monastery, Julian wondered what was keeping his servant so long. When he finally saw him coming up from the meadow carrying a bundle of hay on his shoulders, he became exceedingly angry. 'What is the meaning of this?' he shouted. 'I did not send you to fetch hay! I told you to call the abbot!'

'The abbot will be coming in a short time,' answered the boy.

Just then a man in hobnailed boots, with a scythe hanging over his shoulders, came into view. The boy pointed toward him, indicating to his master that it was Abbot Equitius. Disdainful of the abbot's rustic appearance, Julian was preparing to give him the reception he deserved. But as soon as the abbot came near, Julian felt an overpowering terror in his soul. He trembled and his tongue could scarcely formulate the message he had come to deliver. His pride was broken. Going forward, he knelt down at the abbot's feet, begged for his prayers, and at the same time delivered the Pope's message summoning him to Rome. This news evoked a prayer of thanksgiving from the heart of Equitius, who declared himself blessed from heaven by this message from his Holiness. He ordered horses to be saddled at once for the journey, insisting that Julian start out with him immediately. But the latter declined, saying that it was quite impossible. Exhausted as he was, further travel on that day was out of question.

'You disappoint me, my son,' replied Equitius. 'For if we do not set out today, tomorrow will be too late.' And so the tired executor of the Pope's command compelled the servant of God to wait that night at the monastery.

The next day at dawn a messenger, with his horse panting from a long journey, came to deliver a letter to Julian. It contained an order not to trouble the servant of God, but to leave him at his monastery. When Julian asked why his instructions had been reversed, he was told that, the very night he had set out from Rome, the Pope had been terrified in a vision for having summoned the man of God. So Julian rose quickly and, commending himself to the prayers of

Equitius, said, 'The Holy Father wishes to spare you the fatigue of this journey.'

The words grieved the holy abbot. 'Did I not say yesterday,' he declared, 'that if we did not set out at once we should not set out at all?' Then, as a mark of charity, he detained the reluctant Julian at the monastery for a while to accept its hospitality in return for the trouble and fatigue he had endured.

Now mark well, Peter, how those who have learned to despise themselves in this life enjoy the protection of God. Since they are not ashamed to accept dishonor among men, they receive a spiritual rank among most honorable citizens. On the other hand, God sees how truly despicable those men are who, moved by a desire for the empty glory of this life, plume themselves with greatness in their own and in their neighbors' eyes. It is to such that Christ, the Truth, says: 'You are always courting the approval of men, but God sees your hearts; what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in God's sight.'[7]

PETER

I am surprised that the great Pope could have been misled about so great a saint.

GREGORY

Why are you surprised, Peter, that we who are but human make mistakes? Have you forgotten that it was David's reliance on the untruthful words of a servant that caused him to pronounce sentence against the innocent son of Jonathan?[8] And David had the spirit of prophecy. But, since

7 Luke 16.15.
8 Cf. 2 Kings 16.3; 19.27.

David did this, we can be sure that in God's secret judgment he acted justly, even though we cannot see the justice of it with our human reason. Why should we be surprised, then, if we who are not prophets are sometimes led astray by deceitful men? An important point to consider is that the mind of a superior is distracted by a world of cares, and once the attention is preoccupied with a variety of matters it becomes less observant of details. One who is occupied with a multitude of affairs is all the more liable to be misled in regard to any one of them.

PETER

That is very true.

GREGORY

I must also tell you what Valentine, my former abbot, told me about this holy man Equitius, who, as he says, lay buried in the Church of St. Lawrence the Martyr. Once a farmer set a box of grain on the tomb without consideration or respect for the renowned saint. Suddenly a strong gust of wind came up, seized the box and hurled it far away, without so much as moving another article in the church out of place. This was a clear sign to all that the saint whose body rested there was a man of great virtue.

The following details I heard from the same Fortunatus who was mentioned previously in my story. He has become very dear to me because of his age and the simplicity of his life. When the Lombards entered Valeria, the monks fled from Equitius' monastery to his tomb in the Church of St. Lawrence. Wild with rage, the barbarians broke into the

church and forced the monks out into the open, intending to torture or kill them. With a groan of anguish one of the monks exclaimed sadly, 'O blessed Equitius! Do you want us to be driven out in this way? Why do you not come to defend us?'

At the sound of his voice, an unclean spirit seized the Lombards. They fell to the ground and were tormented relentlessly until all, even those outside, came to realize what was happening. After that, they no longer dared to profane the holy place. And the saintly man who at this time defended his disciples was later to help many who fled to his tomb for aid..

(5) Another story was told me by a fellow bishop of mine who had been a monk in the city of Ancona and had lived the religious life with extraordinary zeal. Some of our older men who come from there will bear me out in this statement.

Near the city of Ancona there was a church dedicated to St. Stephen the Martyr. The sacristan of this church, a pious man named Constantius, was known far and wide for his sanctity. Having renounced the things of this world completely, he directed his soul heavenward with all the powers of his mind.

One day the church's oil supply ran out, and Constantius had nothing with which to fill the lamps. So he took water, poured some into each lamp, and fixed a wick in the middle as usual. Then he lighted the lamps and they all began to burn as if they were fed with oil. Try to imagine now, Peter, how great must have been the merits of the man who could change the nature of a physical element.

PETER

This is indeed wonderful. Now I should like to learn about the humility in the heart of this man whose life was most remarkable in external manifestations of holiness.

GREGORY

You do well in looking among the virtues to find a man's true spirit, for almost invariably the miracles a man performs cause severe temptations to his spirit. But you will quickly understand the greatness of Constantius' humility if you listen to but one deed of his.

PETER

Since you have described his miracles so well, I am eager to hear what you have to say about his humility of soul.

GREGORY

The renown of Constantius' holiness spread for miles around and many people were eagerly looking for an opportunity to see him. One day a farmer came a great distance for this very purpose. It happened that at the time the holy man was standing on a kind of ladder, busily trimming the lamps in the church. He was short of stature, frail and slight in appearance. The farmer kept asking for someone to show him the saint. So those who knew Constantius pointed him out. But, as dull minds measure the quality of a man by his physical appearance, the farmer could not make himself believe that this small and lowly figure was the great Con-

stantius of whom he had heard so much. In his unlettered mind he could not reconcile what he had heard with what he now saw. He felt that a person of such a renown could not possibly be so small in appearance. Therefore, when the others insisted that this man really was the saint, the farmer laughed in derision and said, 'I expected to see a man, but this fellow has nothing manly about him.'

Constantius, overhearing these words, left the lamps as they were, hurried down the ladder and threw his arms most affectionately around the farmer and with a friendly kiss thanked him for having expressed his opinion so openly. 'You are the only one,' he said, 'who has looked at me with open eyes.'

The degree of humility Constantius had acquired must be judged from this act, since it shows the great love he had for one who despised him. It takes an insult to prove our hidden qualities. For while the proud repoice in honors, the humble are usually happy to be despised. In fact, when they are little esteemed in the eyes of others, they find good reason to rejoice, because then they see that the judgment they have already formed of themselves is being confirmed.

PETER

This man was truly great because of his miracles, but I see now that he was even greater by reason of his humility.

GREGORY

(6) Marcellinus, another saintly man, was Bishop of Ancona. Because he suffered from the gout, walking was extremely painful for him; so, whenever necessary, his friends

carried him from place to place. It happened one day that due to some carelessness a fire broke out in the city. As its flames grew more and more violent, people came running from all sides to put it out. But in spite of all their efforts to extinguish it, the fire continued to spread and began to threaten the whole city with destruction. Advancing quickly into all the neighboring areas, the conflagration had soon destroyed a large part of the city. No one could stop it now. Then the bishop came to the scene, carried by his friends. The crisis forced him to act. 'Set me down in the path of the fire,' he commanded. They obeyed and put him down in a place toward which the full force of the fire seemed to be driving. Now, strange to say, the flames doubled back over themselves as if thereby to indicate that they could not pass over the bishop. Once the fire was checked at this point, it advanced no farther, but gradually died away without causing further destruction. Now, Peter, consider what great sanctity was required for a sick man to sit there and by prayers subdue the flames.

PETER

I marvel at the thought of it.

GREGORY

(7) Now I will tell you a story about a neighboring place as I heard it from Bishop Maximian and the elderly monk Laurio whom you know well. Both are living today. Laurio received his training under the saintly Anastasius in the monastery of Suppentonia near the city of Nepi. Anastasius himself was a friend of Nonnosus, the prior of the monastery

which stands on Mount Soracte. These two men, noble in character and zealous in the pursuit of virtue, living as they did in neighboring monasteries, frequently found occasion to associate with each other. Nonnosus in his monastery lived under a very severe abbot whose harshness he bore with remarkable peace of mind. As prior he showed himself gentle and mild toward the brethren, while his humility frequently softened the abbot's irascible nature. Since the monastery was built on top of a mountain, there was not enough level ground for planting even a small garden. The only possible place was a ledge running along the mountainside, but this was occupied by a huge rock protruding from the ground. One day it occured to Nonnosus that this area might suffice for raising at least a few vegetables, if only the rock were taken away. Yet he realized that even fifty pair of oxen could not move so huge a mass. Despairing of human efforts, he turned to God for help. Accordingly, he went there during the night and prayed fervently. In the morning, when his brother monks came to the place, they saw that the massive rock had been removed, leaving ample room for a garden.

At another time the holy man was washing the glass lamps in the chapel. One of them fell from his hands and dropped to the floor with a crash. Fearing the violent anger of his abbot, Nonnosus swept the fragments together before the altar and knelt down in earnest prayer. When he looked up, all the broken pieces had been neatly fitted together into one unbroken whole.

In these two miracles he imitated two other saints: St. Gregory,[9] who moved a mountain, and St. Donatus,[10] who restored a broken chalice.

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9 Gregory the Wonder-worker (d. Nov. 17, c. 270).
10 Bishop of Arezzo (martyred, August 7, 362).

PETER

We have new miracles, then, in imitation of the old.

GREGORY

I should also like to point out a similarity between the miracles of Nonnosus and Eliseus if you care to listen.

PETER

Nothing could please me more.

GREGORY

One day the monastery's oil supply had run out. Since the new crop of olives was now being harvested and the olive trees in their own orchard bore hardly any fruit, the abbot decided to let the brethren go into the neighboring orchards to find work. In payment for their labor they were ask a portion of oil for the monastery. Nonnosus, however, in all humility prevented this from happening, for he feared that the monks in going out of the monastery to seek gain would suffer spiritual harm. Therefore, he ordered the few olives that could be found in the monastery's garden to be gathered and put into the oil press. Whatever oil they yielded was to be brought to him.

The brethren did as he wished and, collecting the oil in a small jar, brought it to him. Nonnosus took it and at once placed it in front of the altar. Then, bidding his brethren leave the chapel, he knelt down to pray. In a few moments he called them back and asked them to pour a little of the

blessed oil into every jar they could find in the monastery, so that each might contain some of this blessed fluid. These jars were then closed. The next day when they were opened they were found full of oil.[11]

PETER

Every day of our life we see the fulfillment of our Lord's words, 'My Father has never ceased working, and I too must be at work.'[12]

GREGORY

(8) Anastasius, whom I referred to above, was at that time a notary of the Church at Rome, which, by the grace of God is now in my care. Desiring to devote all his time to God alone, he gave up his public position in order to live the monastic life at Suppentonia, the monastery I mentioned at the opening of this story. Having spent many years there in great piety he ruled it with utmost care when he was made its abbot.

A steep mountain rose to a great height over the monastery and below it lay a deep chasm. Now, when the time had come for God to reward the labors of Anastasius, a voice was heard one night calling from the top of the cliff in prolonged tones, 'Anastasius, come!' Immediately after that, seven other monks were called by name in the same way. A short period of silence followed and then the voice summoned another monk. Since the whole community heard these names clearly spoken, there was no doubt in the mind of anyone that death awaited those who had been thus sum-

11 Cf. 4 Kings 4.1-7.
12 John 5.17.

moned. Within a few days Anastasius died. The others were summoned in the order in which they had been called. The brother whose name was heard after the interval of silence continued to live on for a few days after the others had passed away, then he, too, died. The monks now understood why there had been a period of silence.

But a remarkable incident had occurred at Anastasius' death. One of the monks, not wishing to be left behind, had come to kneel at his bedside, pleading tearfully with him. 'By the God whom you are going to face soon,' he had said, 'I beg you let me depart from this world within seven days after you have passed away.' He died about a week after Anastasius. Now, since his name had not been called by the voice from the cliff, it was evident that the saintly Anastasius himself had obtained for this disciple of his the grace of following him so quickly to eternity.

PETER

Since this monk was not summoned with the others, yet was taken out of the world through the prayers of the holy Anastasius, what am I to conclude but that great saints are sometimes able to obtain what God has not predestined?

GREGORY

By no means! Holy men cannot obtain what has not been predestined. Whatever they accomplish through prayer has been predestined for accomplishment through prayer. Even our predestination to heaven has been so ordained that we must exert ourselves to attain it, for it is only through

prayer that we obtain the kingdom decreed for us by God from all eternity.

PETER

I should like to have clearer proof that prayer can be of help for predestination.

GREGORY

What I have said, Peter, can be quickly proved. You know that the Lord said to Abraham, 'Through Isaac shall your descendants be called.' He also said to him, 'I will make you the father of a multitude of nations.' And again He promised him, 'I will indeed bless you, and will surely multiply your descendants as the stars of the heavens, and the sands on the seashore.'[13] From these statements it is clear that almighty God intended to increase the posterity of Abraham through his son Isaac. Yet we read in the Bible, 'Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife because she was barren. The Lord answered Isaac and his wife Rebecca conceived.'[14] Now, if the increase of Abraham's people was predestined to come through Isaac, why did he receive a sterile wife? Can we not readily conclude from this that predestination is fulfilled through prayer, seeing that the one in whom God predestined the descendants of Abraham to be multiplied was blessed with offspring in this manner?

13 Gen. 21.12; 17.5; 22.17.
14 Gen. 25.21.

PETER

Your reasoning has solved the problem and removed all my doubts.

GREGORY

Would you like to hear about the saints of Tuscany, their character and intimate knowledge of God?

PETER

By all means! Please tell me about them.

GREGORY

(9) Boniface, Bishop of Ferentino, was a very saintly man and a true bishop in every respect. The priest Gaudentius has many remarkable things to say about him, and what he says is all the more trustworthy because he received his training under this good bishop and was witness to the events he narrates.

There was great poverty in Bishop Boniface's church—a condition which in upright souls safeguards the virtue of humility. The only source of revenue he had was a small vineyard, and even that was one day struck by a severe hailstorm. Nearly everything in it was destroyed. There remained only a few clusters of grapes here and there on the vines. Seeing himself thus further impoverished, the saintly bishop entered the vineyard and thanked God sincerely for this added deprivation.

When the grapes began to ripen, he set a guard over the

vineyard to keep watch as usual, and asked his nephew, the priest Constantius, to prepare all the wine jars and wine casks with a fresh coating of pitch. Constantius was very much surprised at this, for he thought it rather foolish to bother about wine jars if there was going to be no wine. Yet he did not ask the reason for the command, but obediently got all the vessels ready for use.

Having gathered the grapes and brought them to the wine press, the man of God ordered everyone to leave the storehouse except a small boy who was to stay there with him to trample out the few handfuls of grapes. As the juice began to flow from the press the bishop caught it in a small vessel. By pouring a little of it into each of the jars and casks that had been prepared, he put a blessing upon all of them. Then he asked Constantius to have the poor gather round the wine press. At once the wine began to flow abundantly until all the poor had their needs well supplied. After that the boy came out of the wine press, and the bishop, having locked and sealed the door of the storehouse, returned to his church.

Two days later he called Constantius again and, after saying a prayer, opened the door of the storehouse. The jars into which he had poured only a few drops of wine were now filled to the brim. In fact, they would have overflowed and flooded the entire room with wine had the bishop waited outside a moment longer. With a stern countenance he commanded the priest not to disclose the miracle to anyone as long as he, the bishop, was still alive. No doubt he feared that he would become worthless in the eyes of God if this miracle was to bring him honor and esteem from men. He wished to follow the example of our divine Master, who commanded His disciples to tell no one the things they

had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead,[15] thereby instructing us in the ways of humility.

PETER

I have been looking for an opportunity to ask why the two blind men who had their sight restored by Christ went out and 'talked of him in all the country round'[16] after they had been expressly commanded to tell no one. Did the only-begotten Son, co-eternal with the Father and the Holy Spirit, express in this instance a wish beyond His power to fulfill? Was it impossible for Him to keep this miracle hidden?

GREGORY

Every act of our Redeemer, performed through His human nature, was meant to be a pattern for our actions, so that in following His footsteps according to the measure of our ability we might walk unfalteringly along the path of our present lifework. And so our Lord, having performed the miracle, commanded the two men to tell no one, and yet He could not stop them from spreading the fame of it. The purpose of this was to show His disciples that, in following the example of His teaching, they should have the will to remain hidden in their great deeds, but that their holy deeds should be made public against their will, for the benefit of others. Thus, the desire to keep their good works hidden would be an expression of great humility, while the inability to keep them so would bring great profit to others. Our Lord, then, did not will anything that He was powerless to

15 Cf. Matt. 17.9.
16 Matt. 9.31.

fulfill; rather, in his position as teacher, He showed his disciples by example what they should be willing to do and what should be done in their regard even against their will.

PETER

I am delighted with your explanation.

GREGORY

There are still a few deeds of Bishop Boniface that should be included here, since we are giving his life story. Once, shortly before the feast of the martyr St. Proclus, Fortunatus, a nobleman of the city, earnestly requested the bishop to stop at his house for a meal after Mass at the martyr's shrine. The man of God could not refuse this charitable invitation. So, after Mass, he went to dine at Fortunatus' home. Before they could say grace, a man with a monkey appeared at the door, clashing his cymbals. He was one of the popular minstrels of the city who made his living by this kind of entertainment. Annoyed at the sound of the cymbals, the holy man exclaimed, 'Alas! That poor wretched is dead! He is dead, I say. I come to table and, before I have opened my mouth to pray, this man with a monkey at his side is already playing cymbals. Nevertheless, be charitable to him,' he added, 'and give him something to eat and drink. But be assured, he is dead.'

The unfortunate man was received into the house and given bread and wine, but as he crossed the threshold to leave, a large stone fell from the roof and struck him on the head. Prostrated by the blow, he was raised half-dead from

the ground. The next day he died. And so the bishop's words were fulfilled.

You see, Peter, great reverence is due to holy men because they are the temples of God. When a holy man is provoked to anger, no less a person is angered than He who dwells in that temple. We must, therefore, fear the anger of the just from a firm convinction that the One who is present in them has full power to inflict whatever vengeance He may choose.

At another time, the priest Constantius, having sold his horse, deposited the twelve gold solidi he received for it in his money chest for safe keeping. One day while he was away on business several poor people came unexpectedly to the house to beg for alms. The saintly Boniface, unable to find anything to give them, was deeply grieved, for how could he, the bishop, turn these wretched poor from his door empty-handed. Then he remembered that his nephew had sold his horse and put the money away in a chest. Filled with holy zeal, the man of God broke open the chest, took the twelve gold pieces and distributed them among his poor visitors. When Constantius came back and saw the chest broken and the money gone, he began to shout and scold angrily: 'Everyone can live peacefully in this house except me. For me that is impossible!'

The commotion brought the entire household to the scene. The bishop tried to calm his excited nephew with reassuring words, but received only abusive language in return. 'All others can live here quietly,' he was told. 'But for me there is no peace in your house. Give me back my money.'

Greatly disturbed at these words the bishop took refuge in the Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Standing there with the folds of his garment stretched out over his extended

arms, he begged her to give him what was needed to appease the anger of the irate priest. When he looked down again at the open folds, he saw there, to his astonishment, twelve solidi shining brightly like gold taken directly from the fire. Leaving the Church at once, he threw the gold pieces into the lap of the infuriated priest. 'Here,' he said, 'you have the money you demand. But mark my word. Because of your avarice you shall not succeed me as bishop of this church.'

This sentence proved to be true. The priest, no doubt, was laying aside the money to obtain the episcopal see. The words of the God-fearing bishop prevailed—Constantius never became bishop, but ended his life as a priest.

At another time two Goths came to Bishop Boniface asking hospitality. They were going to Ravenna, they said. The bishop gave them a small wooden cask of wine to drink on the way with their meals. They drank of this every day until they came to Ravenna, and continued to do so during the few days they spent there. Finally they came back to the venerable bishop, carrying the cask with them. They had used wine every day, yet it had never failed them, just as if this little wooden cask itself were the source of wine, not a mere container being refilled.

An elderly cleric who came from this region a short time ago also told me about Bishop Boniface. His account is worth repeating. One day, on entering his garden, the bishop found it covered with caterpillars. Seeing all his vegetables going to ruin, he turned to the caterpillars and said, 'I adjure you in the name of our Lord God, Jesus Christ, depart from here and stop eating these vegetables.' In obedience to his voice all the caterpillars, down to the very last one, disappeared from the garden.

But why should anyone be surprised to hear what this

man did as bishop, when he was standing high in dignity before the Lord and full of manly virtues? The deeds of his boyhood, as they are related by the elderly cleric, cause even greater astonishment.

While he was still at home with his mother, he would sometimes leave the house and later return without his coat or even without his shirt, for, as soon as he saw anyone in need of clothes, he would give up his own. By divesting his body in this way, he wished to clothe his soul in the sight of God with merits for heaven. His mother frequently rebuked him for this, telling him that it was not right to give his garments to the poor when he himself was in need.

Going to the granary one day, the mother found that her son had distributed in alms to the poor almost all the wheat she had stored up that year for the family. The thought of having lost a whole year's food supply nearly drove her frantic. Boniface, the child of God, seeing her in such distress, tried to console her as well as he knew how. But she would not listen to him. So he begged her to leave the granary. Meanwhile, he knelt down beside the small pile of wheat that still remained and prayed fervently. Then he invited his mother to come back again into the granary. It was now filled to the top with a supply of grain much greater than before. Moved to compunction by this miracle, the mother thereafter urged her son to continue giving freely, since his prayers were so quickly and so abundantly answered.

Boniface used to tend his mother's hens in a yard near the house. Frequently a fox would come from his den nearby and carry off some of the flock. One day when the boy Boniface was standing in the yard, the fox came as usual and took one of them. The boy quickly ran into the church and fell on his kness: 'O God,' he prayed in a loud voice,

'can you be satisfied to see me go hungry at my mother's table? Look! A fox is eating up all our hens!' The moment he finished the prayer he ran out again. Almost immediately the fox came back, opened his jaws to free the hen, and fell dead at Boniface's feet.

PETER

How wonderful that God should answer the prayers of those who hope in Him, even when they pray for childish favors!

GREGORY

It is the way of God's providence, Peter. He grants us many little favors to increase our hope for greater ones. In this case, He heard the simple request of an upright little boy in order to teach him complete confidence in petitions of greater moment.

PETER

That is a charming explanation.

GREGORY

(10) Fortunatus, Bishop of Todi, was another man of great piety in Tuscany. He possessed extraordinary power over evil spirits, for on occasions he would expel legions of them, and, when they turned their violence against him personally, he would crush them with the weapon of incessant prayer.

One of Fortunatus' intimate friends was a man named Julian, the protector of our church, who died here at Rome

a short time ago. It was from him that I learned the story I am going to tell you now. Because of their great friendship, Julian was often witness to the bishop's doings, and in later years he was to draw examples for our instruction from his delightful store of memories.

A noble lady in the neighborhood of Tuscany had a daughter-in-law, who, a short time after her marriage, had been invited to come with her mother-in-law to the dedication of the Church of St. Sebastian. During the night preceding the dedication she was unable to abstain from the use of marriage. This indulgence caused her some pangs of conscience in the morning, yet human respect bade her join the procession. So, fearing embarrassment in the sight of men more than the dread judgment of God, she accompanied her mother-in-law to the dedication of the church. As soon as the relics of the martyr St. Sebastian were brought into the chapel, the evil spirit seized the young wife and threw her to the ground in agony. The priest of the church, seeing her wretched condition, took the linen cloth from the altar to cover her. But the Devil immediately turned on him, too, for in wishing to help the woman he had exceeded the limits of his power. Through this experience, therefore, the priest was forced to recognize the incident for what it really was. The bystanders then carried the stricken woman out of the church to her home, where she continued to suffer from these attacks without interruption. Finally, her relatives, pursuing her with misguided human love, entrusted her cure to magicians who would utterly ruin her soul in their attempt to aid her body temporarily with their magic art. Accordingly, the young woman was taken to a river and submerged, while the magicians with endless formulas tried to expel the evil spirit. No sooner had they expelled one devil from her

by their unholy craft, than God, who judges all, allowed a whole legion to enter into her. From then on it seemed that all the devils together were wildly agitating her body, shouting and screaming furiously.

At this, her relatives came to their senses. They acknowledged their utter lack of faith and agreed to place the young woman under the care and protection of the saintly Fortunatus. Once he had accepted responsibility for the woman's welfare, the holy bishop spent many days and nights in prayer, applying all the diligence and zeal necessary to overcome the legion of devils standing against him. After some days of fervent prayer, he was able to give the young woman back to her relatives, sound and healthy, without a trace of the former evil remaining.

At another time this servant of God drove an unclean spirit out of a possessed man. Toward evening, a time when few men are about, this unclean spirit masquerading as a stranger walked up and down the streets of the city. 'Oh, what a holy bishop you have in Fortunatus,' he kept shouting. 'See what he has done! He has thrown me, a stranger, out of my lodging. I look for a night's shelter but can find none in this city.'

A man sitting at the open hearth in his home with his wife and little son happened to hear the voice, and, curious to know what the bishop had done, invited the stranger into his house to join the family. While they were talking together, the evil spirit suddenly took hold of the little boy and cast him into the hearth where the flames quickly caused his death. Only too late did the wretched father realize that he had welcomed into his own home the evil spirit expelled by Bishop Fortunatus.

PETER

How was it that the Devil dared to commit such a crime in this home, seeing that the father had practiced toward him the hospitality due to strangers?

GREGORY

My dear Peter, many things are good only in appearance but not in reality, because they do not flow from good motives. That is why Christ says in the Gospel, 'If thy eye is diseased, the whole of thy body will be in darkness.'[17] For an act which results from an evil intention becomes bad in itself, though outwardly it may still appear good. I believe that the man who lost his son while showing hospitality found pleasure not in his work of mercy, but in the defamation of the bishop. The punishment which followed makes it clear that the previous act of hospitality was not without blame. For there are some who perform their good works in order to cast a shadow of reproach on their neighbors. They are motivated not by the good they do, but by the praise they receive at another's expense. I am inclined to think that the man who invited the evil spirit to accept hospitality was more intent on parading his own goodness than on doing a work of mercy. He wished to appear more righteous than the bishop, by receiving a person whom the bishop had rejected.

17 Matt. 6.23.

PETER

What you say is true, for the outcome shows that the hospitality did not proceed from a pure motive.

GREGORY

At another time, a blind man who had been brought to Fortunatus begged for the help of his powerful intercession. The request was granted. After saying a prayer, the holy bishop made the sign of the cross on the poor man's eyes and immediately the blindness vanished and clear vision was restored.

There is also the story of a soldier's mad horse. It took a number of men to hold it under control, and even then it would lash out right and left trying to bite whoever was within reach. Once the men had secured it as well as they could, they brought it to the man of God, who instantly made the sign of the cross over its head. With this, the horse became perfectly gentle. In fact, when the soldier noticed the sudden and complete change in the temper of his horse, he decided to give it to Bishop Fortunatus as a present. The latter, however, refused to accept it. When the soldier persisted in his offer, the bishop decided on a happy compromise. By paying a fair price he could accept the horse without taking it as a reward for the miracle. An outright rejection, he saw, would only have caused the soldier great disappointment. So, following the dictates of charity, he bought the horse, though he had no need of it.

There is another miracle I should mention. It was related to me about twelve days ago by a rather poor old man who had been directed to me. Since I always delight in conversing

with old men, I asked him where he was from. He informed me that he came from the city of Todi. 'Tell me, then, my dear man,' I said, 'did you know Bishop Fortunatus?'

'I knew him well,' he replied.

'Do you know of any miracles he performed?' I continued. 'What kind of man was he? I would be very happy to know.'

'He was far different from the men of today,' answered the old man. 'Whenever he turned to almighty God with a request, it was answered without delay. There is one miracle that comes to my mind now.

'One day some Goths passing through Todi on their way to Ravenna carried off two small boys from an estate at the outskirts of the city. When the news of this reached Fortunatus, he had the Goths summoned to his presence immediately. At first he spoke kindly to them, trying to soften the hardness of their hearts. Then he added, "I will pay you whatever price you demand, but bring back the boys you carried off. Do it as a personal favor to me."

' "We are prepared to carry out any request of yours but this," answered the one who appeared to be their leader. "We will not give back the boys on any account."

'With a mild threat in his voice Fortunatus replied, "This makes me very sad. You do not listen to your father. Do not disappoint me. It will bring you no blessings."

'But the Goths remained obdurate and left without granting the bishop's request.

'The next day, on leaving the city, the leader of the Goths paid Fortunatus another visit. All the good bishop could do was repeat his previous request on behalf of the boys. The Goth would not agree to restore them. With deep sorrow in his voice the bishop then said, "I know this it will go hard with you for leaving me so sadly disappointed."

'Making light of these words, the Goth returned to his quarters and ordered the boys to go ahead on horseback with his men. He himself followed shortly after. When he passed in front of the Church of St. Peter the Apostle, his horse slipped and fell. As a result, the Goth suffered a badly broken rib and had to be carried to his lodging. His first thought was to have the boys brought back. Then without delay he sent Fortunatus a short message saying, "Please, father, bid your deacon come to see me."

'When the latter arrived at his bedside, the Goth had the boys brought into the room. Though previously he had utterly refused to leave them with the bishop, he now presented them to the deacon with the words, "Go and say to my lord the bishop: Because you have cursed me, I have been struck down. Here are the boys for whom you pleaded. Take them, and do not forget to say a prayer for me."

'As soon as Fortunatus had the boys safely in his care, he gave the deacon some holy water and bade him hurry back to the Goth. The deacon went as he was told and, as he sprinkled the Goth with the holy water, a most remarkable thing happened. No sooner had the water touched his side than the fractured rib became one solid piece again, completely healed. The Goth rose from his bed that same hour and, mounting his horse, continued his journey as if he had suffered no physical harm of any kind.

'It turned out that the Goth, who in spite of the ransom offered had refused to give up the boys in obedience to the holy bishop, was compelled by physical suffering to give them back without hope of recompense.'

When the old man had finished this story he was eager to pass on to another. But some people whom I was instructing had arrived, and besides it was growing late. So at the

time I could not very well continue listening to his accounts, much as I always enjoy doing so.

The next day the old man told me about another miracle of Fortunatus, even more remarkable than the previous one. 'In the same city of Todi,' he began, 'there was a man of exemplary life named Marcellus, who lived there with his two sisters. On Holy Saturday evening he took sick and died. Since it was necessary to carry his remains a great distance, he could not be buried the same day. The consequent delay in the funeral services gave the two sisters time to hurry to their revered bishop, Fortunatus, and pour out their hearts in grief. "We know that you follow in the footsteps of the holy Apostles," they said, "and that you cleanse lepers and give sight to the blind. Come with us and bring our brother back to life."

'This was very sad news for Bishop Fortunatus and he, too, could not restrain his tears. "Go home again," he told them, "and do not insist on this request of yours, for your brother's death occured by God's decree, which no man can oppose." With this answer the two sisters departed, leaving the bishop alone to mourn his friend's death.

'Before dawn of Easter Sunday he summoned his two deacons and went with them to the home of the deceased, proceeding directly to the place where the corpse was laid out. There he knelt down and after praying for some time rose and sat down near the body. Then in a subdued voice he called, "Brother Marcellus." At the sound of this low voice so near him, the dead man was roused as though awakened from a gentle slumber. Opening his eyes and looking at the bishop, he said, "What have you done? What have you done?" The bishop in turn asked, "What have I done?" To this Marcellus answered: "Yesterday two people came to

release me from the body and lead me to the abode of the blessed. Today a messenger is sent to them with the command, "Take him back, because Bishop Fortunatus is visiting at his home." Marcellus quickly regained his strength and lived for a long time after this episode.'

We must not suppose, however, that he lost the place that had been given him in heaven. There is no doubt that through the prayers of his patron he was able to live even more virtuously after this experience with death than before it, for he had always made an earnest effort to please almighty God.

But why relate all these miracles from the lifetime of Bishop Fortunatus, when even at present numerous wonders are worked at the tomb where he lies buried? Here, whenever people come to venerate his earthly remains with a lively faith, Fortunatus continues to drive out devils from possessed persons and to heal the sick, just as he had done during his lifetime.

Now I wish to return again in my narrative to the province of Valeria, because it is the scene of some remarkable deeds which were told me by the Fortunatus whom I mentioned much earlier in this book.[18] He still comes to see me frequently and edifies me with stories of the past.

(11) In this province there was a man named Martyrius, a devout servant of almighty God. As a witness to his sanctity we have the following miracle.

One day, when some of the monks were baking bread, they forgot to stamp the sign of the cross on the loaves. It was the custom there to stamp the unbaked loaves with a wooden form which divided them into four equal parts. Overhearing the conversation of his fellow monks, Martyrius

18 See above, p. 16.

knew that the loaves had not been marked. The loaves were already in the hot embers and covered with ashes. Turning to his companions, he asked, 'Why did you not stamp this bread?' At the same time he made the sign of the cross over the embers. As he did so, a loud noise like the breaking of a jar, came from inside the hot ashes where the bread was baking. When the loaves were removed from the fire it was found that they had been stamped with a cross, not through contact with a physical object, but by the power of faith.

(12) There is in that region a valley called Interorina, or Interocrina, its popular name. Here the saintly Severus exercised his priestly care over the Church of Blessed Mary Ever Virgin, Mother of God. One day he received an urgent summons from the owner of an estate who was lying on his deathbed. The messengers begged Severus come quickly and intercede for the poor man's soul, so that he might repent and die absolved from his sins. Severus, busy at the time watering his vineyard, told the messengers to go back to the sick man, adding that he himself would follow in a very short time. He saw that the work in the vineyard would require but a few moments, so he stayed long enough to finish it before setting out to visit the sick man.

On his way there, he was met by the same messengers returning to him. 'Why did you delay, Father?' they asked. 'There is no need to trouble yourself any longer, for our friend is now dead.'

At this news, Severus trembled with fear and began loudly to accuse himself of being responsible for the man's death. With tears in his eyes he arrived at the scene, fell to his knees in front of the bed and wept bitterly. While he was thus lamenting and afflicting himself for his sinful neglect, the dead man suddenly came back to life. At sight of this

the bystanders burst out in shouts of amazement and wept now for joy. On being asked where he had been and how he had come back, he said: 'The guides who led me away were dreadful creatures. From their mouths and nostrils they breathed a most unbearable fire. While they were leading me through a dark region, suddenly, like a beautiful vision, a young man with wings came to meet us and said to my guides, "Lead him back again, because the priest Severus is weeping and through his tears has obtained pardon from God for the soul of this man." '

Hearing this, Severus quickly got to his feet and offered the powers of his intercession to help the man do penance for his sins. And so, after spending seven days in works of penance, the man died a happy death on the eighth day.

Consider, therefore, how much the Lord loved His disciple Severus—only for a brief moment would he allow sadness to overwhelm him.

PETER

These are truly remarkable deeds! Up to the present they were entirely unknown to me. How is it that we cannot find men of this type today?

GREGORY

I believe there still are many such men in the world, Peter. One cannot conclude that there are no great saints just because no great miracles are worked. The true estimate of life, after all, lies in acts of virtue, not in the display of miracles. There are many, Peter, who without performing miracles, are not at all inferior to those who perform them.

PETER

How, then, I ask you, can I tell that there are some saints who without working miracles are equal to those saints who do?

GREGORY

Surely you know that in the apostolic college Paul was brother to Peter, the prince of the Apostles.

PETER

I do, indeed, and there is no doubt that, although he was the least of the Apostles, he labored more than all the rest.

GREGORY

You recall, too, how Peter walked on the water, whereas Paul was shipwrecked on the high seas.[19] In the very same element, then, where Paul was unable to proceed on board board ship, Peter could go on foot. Though these two Apostles did not share equally in the power of performing miracles, it is clear that they have an equal share in the rewards of heaven.

PETER

I am much pleased with what you say, for I realize now that in these matters one must consider a man's way of life, not his miracles. But, since miracles are a testimony to holiness of life, I beg you not to end your narrative now, but to continue nourishing my spirit with these examples of sanctity.

19 Cf. Matt. 14.29; Acts 27.14-44.

GREGORY

I should be delighted to tell you the miracles of the saintly Benedict, thereby bringing honor and glory to our Redeemer, but the day is nearly spent. So, if we leave these miracles for another time, we shall be free to speak of them at greater length.

BOOK TWO

Life and Miracles of St. Benedict Founder and Abbot of the Monastery Which Is Known as the Citadel of Campania[1]

THERE WAS A MAN of saintly life; blessed Benedict was his name, and he was blessed also with God's grace. Even in boyhood he showed mature understanding, for he kept his heart detached from every pleasure with a strength of character far beyond his years. While still living in the world, free to enjoy its earthly advantages, he saw how barren it was with its attractions and turned from it without regret.

He was born in the district of Norcia[2] of distinguished parents, who sent him to Rome for a liberal education. But when he saw many of his fellow students falling headlong into vice, he stepped back from the threshold of the world in which he had just set foot. For he was afraid that if he

1 The Abbey of Monte Cassino. For the origin of this earlier name, cf. n. 28.

2 A little town about seventy miles northeast of Rome. The saint was born around 480.

acquired any of its learning he, too, would later plunge, body and soul, into the dread abyss. In his desire to please God alone, he turned his back on further studies, gave up home and inheritance and resolved to embrace the religious life. He took this step, well aware of his ignorance, yet wise, uneducated though he was.

I was unable to learn about all his miraculous deeds. But the few that I am going to relate I know from the lips of four of his own disciples: Constantine, the holy man who succeeded him as abbot; Valentinian, for many years superior of the monastery at the Lateran;[3] Simplicius, Benedict's second successor; and Honoratus, who is still abbot of the monastery where the man of God first lived.[4]

(1) When Benedict abandoned his studies to go into solitude, he was accompanied only by his nurse, who loved him dearly. As they were passing through Affile, a number of devout men invited them to stay there and provided them with lodging near the Church of St. Peter.[5] One day, after asking her neighbors to lend her a tray for cleaning wheat, the nurse happened to leave it on the edge of the table and when she came back found it had slipped off and broken in two. The poor woman burst into tears; she had only borrowed this tray and now it was ruined. Benedict, who had always been a devout and thoughtful boy, felt sorry for his nurse when he saw her weeping. Quietly picking up both the pieces, he knelt down by himself and prayed earnestly to God, even to the point of tears. No sooner had he finished his prayer than he noticed that the two pieces were joined together again, without even a mark to show where the tray

3 Next to the Lateran Basilica in Rome.
4 Namely, Subiaco.
5 Literally, 'in the Church of St. Peter'; most likely, in a hospice attached to the church.

had been broken. Hurrying back at once, he cheerfully reassured his nurse and handed her the tray in perfect condition.

News of the miracle spread to all the country around Affile and stirred up so much admiration among the people that they hung the tray at the entrance of their church. Ever since then it has been a reminder to all of the great holiness Benedict had acquired at the very outset of his monastic life. The tray remained there many years for everyone to see, and it is still hanging over the doorway of the church in these days of Lombard rule.[6] Benedict, however, preferred to suffer ill-treatment from the world rather than enjoy its praises. He wanted to spend himself laboring for God, not to be honored by the applause of men. So he stole away secretly from his nurse and fled to a lonely wilderness about thirty-five miles from Rome called Subiaco. A stream of cold, clear water running through the region broadens out at this point to form a lake, then flows off and continues on its course.[7] On his way there Benedict met a monk named Romanus, who asked him where he was going. After discovering the young man's purpose, Romanus kept it secret and even helped him carry it out by clothing him with the monastic habit and supplying his needs as well as he could.

At Subiaco, Benedict made his home in a narrow cave and for three years remained concealed there, unknown to anyone except the monk Romanus, who lived in a monastery close by under the rule of Abbot Deodatus. With fatherly

6 The Lombards, a Germanic people, left their homes along the upper Danube and invaded Italy in 568, establishing a kingdom there which lasted until 774.

7 Subiaco lies along the Anio River about five miles north of Affile. The lake St. Gregory speaks of gave the site its Latin name of *Sublacum*. It was formed by a dam which Emperor Claudius had built across the river, and lasted until 1305 when the dam was destroyed by floods.

concern this monk regularly set aside as much bread as he could from his own portion; then from time to time, unnoticed by his abbot, he left the monastery long enough to take the bread to Benedict. There was no path leading from the monastery down to his cave because of a cliff that rose directly over it. To reach him Romanus had to tie the bread to the end of a long rope and lower it over the cliff. A little bell attached to the rope let Benedict know when the bread was there, and he would come out to get it. The ancient Enemy of mankind grew envious of the kindness shown by the older monk in supplying Benedict with food, and one day, as the bread was being lowered, he threw a stone at the bell and broke it. In spite of this, Romanus kept on with his faithful service.

At length the time came when almighty God wished to grant him rest from his toil and reveal Benedict's virtuous life to others. Like a shining lamp his example was to be set on a lampstand to give light to everyone in God's house.[8] The Lord therefore appeared in a vision to a priest some distance away, who had just prepared his Easter dinner. 'How can you prepare these delicacies for yourself,' He asked, 'while my servant is out there in the wilds suffering from hunger?'

Rising at once, the priest wrapped up the food and set out to find the man of God that very day. He searched for him along the rough mountainsides, in the valleys, and through the caverns, until he found him hidden in the cave. They said a prayer of thanksgiving together and then sat down to talk about the spiritual life. After a while the priest suggested that they take their meal. 'Today is the great feast of Easter,' he added.

8 Cf. Matt. 5.15.

'It must be a great feast to have brought me this kind visit,' the man of God replied, not realizing after his long separation from men that it was Easter Sunday.

'Today is really Easter,' the priest insisted, 'the feast of our Lord's Resurrection. On such a solemn occasion you should not be fasting. Besides, I was sent here by almighty God so that both of us could share in His gifts.'

After that they said grace and began their meal. When it was over they conversed some more and then the priest went back to his church.[9]

At about the same time some shepherds also discovered Benedict's hiding place. When they first looked through the thickets and caught sight of him clothed in rough skins, they mistook him for some wild animal. Soon, however, they recognized in him a servant of God, and many of them gave up their sinful ways for a life of holiness. As a result, his name became known to all the people in that locality and great numbers visited his cave, supplying him with the food he needed and receiving from his lips in return spiritual food for their souls.

(2) One day, while the saint was alone, the Tempter came in the form of a little blackbird, which began to flutter in front of his face. It kept so close that he could easily have caught it in his hand. Instead, he made the sign of the cross and the bird flew away. The moment it left, he was seized with an unusually violent temptation. The evil spirit recalled to his mind a woman he had once seen, and before he realized it his emotions were carrying him away. Almost overcome in the struggle, he was on the point of abandoning the lonely wilderness, when suddenly with the help of God's grace he came to himself.

9 Cf. Acts 9.10-19.

He then noticed a thick patch of nettles and briers next to him. Throwing his garment aside he flung himself into the sharp thorns and stinging nettles. There he rolled and tossed until his whole body was in pain and covered with blood. Yet, once he had conquered pleasure through suffering, his torn and bleeding skin served to drain the poison of temptation from his body. Before long, the pain that was burning his whole body had put out the fires of evil in his heart. It was by exchanging these two fires that he gained the victory over sin. So complete was his triumph that from then on, as he later told his disciples, he never experienced another temptation of this kind.

Soon after, many forsook the world to place themselves under his guidance, for now that he was free from these temptations he was ready to instruct others in the practice of virtue. That is why Moses commanded the Levites to begin their service when they were twenty-five years old or more and to become guardians of the sacred vessels only at the age of fifty.[10]

PETER

The meaning of the passage you quote is becoming a little clearer to me now. Still, I wish you would explain it more fully.

GREGORY

It is a well-known fact, Peter, that temptations of the flesh are violent during youth, whereas after the age of fifty concupiscence dies down. Now, the sacred vessels are the souls of the faithful. God's chosen servants must therefore obey and serve and tire themselves out with strenuous work as long

10 Cf. Num. 8.24-26.

as they are still subject to temptations. Only when full maturity has left them undisturbed by evil thoughts are they put in charge of the sacred vessels, for then they become teachers of souls.

PETER

I like the way you interpreted that passage. Now that you have explained what it means, I hope you will continue with your account of the holy man's life.

GREGORY

(3) With the passing of this temptation, Benedict's soul, like a field cleared of briers, soon yielded a rich harvest of virtues. As word spread of his saintly life, the renown of his name increased. One day the entire community from a nearby monastery[11] came to see him. Their abbot had recently died, and they wanted the man of God to be their new superior. For some time he tried to discourage them by refusing their request, warning them that his way of life would never harmonize with theirs. But they kept insisting, until in the end he gave his consent.

At the monastery he watched carefully over the religious spirit of his monks and would not tolerate any of their previous disobedience. No one was allowed to turn from the straight path of monastic discipline either to the right or to the left. Their waywardness, however, clashed with the standards he upheld, and in their resentment they started to reproach themselves for choosing him as abbot. It only made them the more sullen to find him curbing every fault and evil habit.

11 Usually identified as Vicovaro, about twenty miles farther down the Anio.

They could not see why they should have to force their settled minds into new ways of thinking.

At length, proving once again that the very life of the just is a burden to the wicked,[12] they tried to find a means of doing away with him and decided to poison his wine. A glass pitcher containing this poisoned drink was presented to the man of God during his meal for the customary blessing. As he made the sign of the cross over it with his hand, the pitcher was shattered, even though it was well beyond his reach at the time. It broke at his blessing as if he had struck it with stone.

Then he realized it had contained a deadly drink which could not bear the sign of life. Still calm and undisturbed, he rose at once and, after gathering the community together, addressed them. 'May almighty God have mercy on you,' he said. 'Why did you conspire to do this? Did I not tell you at the outset that my way of life would never harmonize with yours? Go and find yourselves an abbot to your liking. It is impossible for me to stay here any longer.' Then he went back to the wilderness he loved, to live alone with himself in the presence of his heavenly Father.

PETER

I am not quite sure I understand what you mean by saying 'to live with himself.'

GREGORY

These monks had an outlook on religious life entirely unlike his own and were all conspiring against him. Now, if he had tried to force them to remain under his rule, he might have

12 Cf. Wisd. 2.12-20.

forfeited his own fervor and peace of soul and even turned his eyes from the light of contemplation. Their persistent daily faults would have left him almost too weary to look to his own needs, and he would perhaps have forsaken himself without finding them. For, whenever anxieties carry us out of ourselves unduly, we are no longer with ourselves even though we still remain what we are. We are too distracted with other matters to give any attention whatever to ourselves.

Surely we cannot describe as 'with himself' the young man who traveled to a distant country where he wasted his inheritance and then, after hiring himself out to one of its citizens to feed swine, had to watch them eat their fill of pods while he went hungry. Do we not read in Scripture that, as he was considering all he had lost, 'he came to himself and said, "how many hired servants there are in my father's house who have more bread than they can eat" '?[13] If he was already 'with himself,' how could he have come 'to himself'?

Blessed Benedict, on the contrary, can be said to have lived 'with himself' because at all times he kept such close watch over his life and actions. By searching continually into his own soul he always beheld himself in the presence of his Creator. And this kept his mind from straying off to the world outside.

PETER

But what of Peter the Apostle when he was led out of prison by an angel? According to the Scriptures, he, too, 'came to himself.' 'Now I can tell for certain, he said, that the Lord has sent his angel, to deliver me out of Herod's hands, and from all that the people of the Jews hoped to see.'[14]

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13 Luke 15.17.

GREGORY

There are two ways in which we can be carried out of ourselves, Peter. Either we fall below ourselves through sins of thought or we are lifted above ourselves by the grace of contemplation. The young man who fed the swine sank below himself as a result of his shiftless ways and his unclean life. The Apostle Peter was also out of himself when the angel set him free and raised him to a state of ecstasy, but he was above himself. In coming to themselves again, the former had to break with his sinful past before he could find his true and better self, whereas the latter merely returned from the heights of contemplation to his ordinary state of mind.

Now, the saintly Benedict really lived 'with himself' out in that lonely wilderness by always keeping his thoughts recollected. Yet he must have left his own self far below each time he was drawn heavenward in fervent contemplation.

PETER

I am very grateful to you for that explanation. Do you think it was right, though, for him to forsake this community, once he had taken it under his care?

GREGORY

In my opinion, Peter, a superior ought to bear patiently with a community of evil men as long as it has some devout members who can benefit from his presence. When none of the members is devout enough to give any promise of good results, his efforts to help such a community will prove

14 Acts 12.11.

to be a serious mistake, especially if there are opportunities nearby to work more fruitfully for God. Was there anyone the holy man could have hoped to protect by staying where he was, after he saw that they were all united against him?

In this matter we cannot afford to overlook the attitude of the saints. When they find their work producing no results in one place, they move on to another where it can do some good. This explains the action of the blessed Apostle Paul. In order to escape from Damascus, where he was being persecuted, he secured a basket and a rope and had himself secretely lowered over the wall.[15] Yet this outstanding preacher of the Gospel longed to depart and be with Christ, since for him life meant Christ, and death was a prize to be won.[16] Besides being eager for the trials of persecution himself, he even inspired others to endure them.[17] Can we say that Paul feared death, when he expressely declared that he longed to die for the love of Christ? Surely not. But, when he saw how little he was accomplishing at Damascus in spite of all his toil, he saved himself for more fruitful labors elsewhere. God's fearless warrior refused to be held back inside the walls and sought the open field of battle.

And if you do not mind continuing to listen, Peter, you will soon discover that after blessed Benedict left that obstinate community he restored to life many another soul that was spiritually dead.

PETER

I am sure your conclusion is correct, after the simple proof you gave and that striking example from sacred Scripture.

15 Cf. Acts 9.25; 2 Cor. 11.32,33.
16 Cf. Phil. 1.21,23.
17 Cf. Heb. 10.32-36.

Would you be good enough to return now to the story of this great abbot's life?

GREGORY

As Benedict's influence spread over the surrounding countryside because of his signs and wonders, a great number of men gathered round him to devote themselves to God's service. Christ blessed his work and before long he had established twelve monasteries there, with an abbot and twelve monks in each of them. There were a few other monks whom he kept with him, since he felt that they still needed his personal guidance.

It was about this time that pious noblemen from Rome first came to visit the saint and left their sons with him to be schooled in the service of God. Thus, Euthicius[18] brought his son Maurus; and Senator Tertullus, Placid—both very promising boys. Maurus, in fact, who was a little older, had already acquired solid virtue and was soon very helpful to his saintly master. But Placid was still only a child.

(4) In one of the monasteries Benedict had founded in that locality, there was a monk who would never remain with the rest of the community for silent prayer. Instead, he left the chapel as soon as they knelt down to pray, and passed the time aimlessly at whatever happened to interest him. His abbot corrected him repeatedly and at length sent him to the man of God. This time the monk received a stern rebuke for his folly and after his return took the correction to heart for a day or two, only to fall back the third day into his old habit of wandering off during the time of prayer. On learning of this from the abbot, the man of God sent word that he was

18 Usually written 'Equitius,' but 'Euthicius' is the critical reading.

coming over himself to see that the monk mended his ways.

Upon his arrival at the monastery, Benedict joined the community in the chapel at the regular hour. After they had finished chanting the psalms and had begun their silent prayer, he noticed that the restless monk was drawn outside by a little black boy who was pulling at the edge of his habit.

'Do you see who is leading that monk out of the chapel?' he whispered to Abbot Pompeianus and Maurus.

'No,' they replied.

'Let us pray, then,' he said, 'that you may see what is happening to him.'

They prayed for two days, and after that Maurus also saw what was taking place, but Abbot Pompeianus still could not. The next day, when prayers were over, Benedict found the offender loitering outside and struck him with his staff for being so obstinate of heart. From then on the monk remained quietly at prayer like the rest, without being bothered again by the tempter. It was as if that ancient Enemy had been struck by the blow himself and was afraid to domineer over the monk's thoughts any longer.

(5) Three of the monasteries the saint had built close by stood on the bare rocky heights. It was a real hardship for these monks always to go down to the lake to get water for their daily needs. Besides, the slope was steep and they found the descent very dangerous. The members of the three communities therefore came in a body to see the servant of God. After explaining how difficult it was for them to climb down the mountainside every day for their water supply, they assured him that the only solution was to have the monasteries moved somewhere else.

Benedict answered them with fatherly words of encouragement and sent them back. That same night, in company with

the little boy Placid, he climbed to the rocky heights and prayed there for a long time. On finishing his prayer, he placed three stones together to indicate the spot where he had knelt and then went back to his monastery, unnoticed by anyone.

The following day, when the monks came again with their request, he told them to go to the summit of the mountain. 'You will find three stones there,' he said, 'one on top of the other. If you dig down a little, you will see that almighty God has the power to bring forth water even from that rocky summit and in His goodness relieve you of the hardship of such a long climb.'

Going back to the place he had described, they noticed that the surface was already moist. As soon as they had dug the ground away, water filled the hollow and welled up in such abundance that today a full stream is still flowing from the top of the mountain into the ravine below.

(6) At another time a simple, sincere Goth came to Subiaco to become a monk, and blessed Benedict was very happy to admit him. One day he had him take a brush hook and clear away the briers from a place at the edge of the lake where a garden was to be planted. While the Goth was hard at work cutting down the thick brush, the iron blade slipped off the handle and flew into a very deep part of the lake, where there was no hope of recovering it.

At this the poor man ran trembling to Maurus and, after describing the accident, told him how sorry he was for his carelessness. Maurus in turn informed the servant of God, who on hearing what had happened went down to the lake, took the handle from the Goth and thrust it in the water. Immediately the iron blade rose from the bottom of the lake and slipped back onto the handle. Then he handed the tool

back to the Goth and told him, 'Continue with your work now. There is no need to be upset.'

(7) Once while blessed Benedict was in his room, one of his monks, the boy Placid, went down to the lake to draw water. In letting the bucket fill too rapidly, he lost his balance and was pulled into the lake, where the current quickly seized him and carried him about a stone's throw from the shore. Though inside the monastery at the time, the man of God was instantly aware of what had happened and called out to Maurus: 'Hurry, Brother Maurus! The boy who just went down for water has fallen into the lake, and the current is carrying him away.'

What followed was remarkable indeed, and unheard of since the time of Peter the Apostle![19] Maurus asked for the blessing and on receiving it hurried out to fulfill his abbot's command. He kept on running even over the water till he reached the place where Placid was drifting along helplessly. Pulling him up by the hair, Maurus rushed back to shore, still under the impression that he was on dry land. It was only when he set foot on the ground that he came to himself and looking back realized that he had been running on the surface of the water. Overcome with fear and amazement at a deed he would never have thought possible, he returned to his abbot and told him what had taken place.

The holy man would not take any personal credit for the deed, but attributed it to the obedience of his disciple. Maurus, on the contrary, claimed that it was due entirely to his abbot's command. He could not have been responsible for the miracle himself, he said, since he had not even known he was performing it. While they were carrying on this friendly contest of humility, the question was settled by the boy who had been

19 Cf. Matt. 14.28,29.

rescued. 'When I was being drawn out of the water,' he told them, 'I saw the abbot's cloak over my head; he is the one I thought was bringing me to shore.'

PETER

What marvelous deeds these are! They are sure to prove inspiring to all who hear of them. Indeed, the more you tell me about this great man, the more eager I am to keep on listening.

GREGORY

(8) By this time the people of that whole region for miles around had grown fervent in their love for Christ, and many of them had forsaken the world in order to bring their hearts under the light yoke of the Saviour. Now, in a neighboring church there was a priest named Florentius, the grandfather of our subdeacon Florentius. Urged on by the bitter Enemy of mankind, this priest set out to undermine the saint's work. And envious as the wicked always are of the holiness in others which they are not striving to acquire themselves, he denounced Benedict's way of life and kept everyone he could from visiting him.

The progress of the saint's work, however, could not be stopped. His reputation for holiness kept on growing, and with it the number of vocations to a more perfect state of life. This infuriated Florentius all the more. He still longed to enjoy the praise the saint was receiving, yet he was unwilling to lead a praiseworthy life himself. At length, his soul became so blind with jealousy that he decided to poison a loaf of bread and send it to the servant of God as though it was a sign of Christian fellowship.

Though aware at once of the deadly poison it contained, Benedict thanked him for the gift.

At mealtime a raven used to come out of the nearby woods to receive food from the saint's hands. On this occasion he set the poisoned loaf in front of it and said, 'In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, take this bread and carry it to a place where no one will be able to find it.' The raven started to caw and circled round the loaf of bread with open beak and flapping wings as if to indicate that it was willing to obey, but found it impossible to do so. Several times the saint repeated the command. 'Take the bread,' he said, 'and do not be afraid! Take it away from here and leave it where no one will find it.' After hesitating for a long while, the raven finally took the loaf in its beak and flew away. About three hours later, when it had disposed of the bread, it returned and received its usual meal from the hands of the man of God.

The saintly abbot now realized how deep the resentment of his enemy was, and he felt grieved not so much for his own sake as for the priest's. But Florentius, after his failure to do away with the master, determined instead to destroy the souls of the disciples and for this purpose sent seven depraved women into the garden of Benedict's monastery. There they joined hands and danced together for some time within sight of his followers, in an attempt to lead them into sin.

When the saint noticed this from his window, he began to fear that some of his younger monks might go astray. Convinced that the priest's hatred for him was the real cause of this attack, he let envy have its way and, taking only a few monks with him, set out to find a new home. Before he left, he reorganized all the monasteries he had founded, ap-

pointing priors to assist in governing them, and adding some new members to the communities.

Hardly had the man of God made his humble escape from all this bitterness when almighty God struck the priest down with terrible vengeance. As he was standing on the balcony of his house congratulating himself on Benedict's departure, the structure suddenly collapsed, crushing him to death, though the rest of the building remained undamaged. This accident occured before the saint was even ten miles away. His disciple Maurus immediately decided to send a messenger with the news and ask him to return, now that the priest who had caused him so much trouble was dead. Benedict was overcome with sorrow and regret on hearing this, for not only had his enemy been killed, but one of his own disciples had rejoiced over his death. And for showing pleasure in sending such a message he gave Maurus a penance to perform.

PETER

This whole account is really amazing. The water streaming from the rock reminds me of Moses,[20] and the iron blade that rose from the bottom of the lake, of Eliseus.[21] The walking on the water recalls St. Peter,[22] the obedience of the raven, Elias,[23] and the grief at the death of an enemy, David.[24] This man must have been filled with the spirit of all the just.

20 Cf. Exod. 17.1-7; Num. 20.1-11.
21 Cf. 4 Kings 6.4-7.
22 Cf. Matt. 14.28,29.
23 Cf. 3 Kings 17.6.
24 Cf. 2 Kings 1.11,12; 18.33.

GREGORY

Actually, Peter, blessed Benedict possessed the Spirit of only one Person, the Saviour who fills the hearts of all the faithful by granting them the fruits of His Redemption. For St. John says of Him, 'There is one who enlightens every soul born into the world; he was the true light.' And again, 'we have all received something out of his abundance.'[25] Holy men never were able to hand on to others the miraculous powers which they received from God. Our Saviour was the only one to give His followers the power to work signs and wonders, just as He alone could assure His enemies that He would give them the sign of the prophet Jonas.[26] Seeing this sign fulfilled in His death, the proud looked on with scorn. The humble, who saw its complete fulfillment in His rising from the dead, turned to Him with reverence and love. In this mystery, then, the proud beheld Him dying in disgrace, whereas the humble witnessed His triumph over death.

PETER

Now that you have finished explaining this, please tell me where the holy man settled after his departure. Do you know whether he performed any more miracles?

GREGORY

Although he moved to a different place, Peter, his enemy remained the same. In fact, the assaults he had to endure

25 John 1.9,16.
26 Cf. Matt. 12.39,40.

after this were all the more violent, because the very Master of evil was fighting against him in open battle.

The fortified town of Cassino lies at the foot of a towering mountain that shelters it within its slope and stretches upward over a distance of nearly three miles.[27] On its summit stood a very old temple, in which the ignorant country people still worshiped Apollo as their pagan ancestors had done, and went on offering superstitious and idolatrous sacrifices in groves dedicated to various demons.

When the man of God arrived at this spot, he destroyed the idol, overturned the altar and cut down the trees in the sacred groves.[28] Then he turned the temple of Apollo into a chapel dedicated to St. Martin,[29] and where Apollo's altar had stood, he built a chapel in honor of St. John the Baptist. Gradually, the people of the countryside were won over to the true faith by his zealous preaching.

Such losses the ancient Enemy could not bear in silence. This time he did not appear to the saint in a dream or under a disguise, but met him face to face and objected fiercely to the outrages he had to endure. His shouts were so loud that the brethren heard him, too, although they were unable to see him. According to the saint's own description, the Devil

27 St. Gregory is referring to the winding path that led up the mountain. The altitude of Monte Cassino is 1,500 feet.

28 Monte Cassino is about seventy-five miles southeast of Rome. St. Benedict arrived there in 529. In addition to the pagan shrines mentioned by St. Gregory, there was also a very ancient fortress on the summit for the defense of the townspeople below and the surrounding plains. The Abbey of Monte Cassino was built entirely within the walls of the fortress and was for that reason known at first as the Citadel of Campania, as we learn from the full title of this book. Cf. L. Tosti, *St. Benedict, an Historical Discourse on His Life,* trans. W. Woods (London 1896) 83-86; I. Schuster, *Storia di san Benedetto e dei suoi tempi* (Milan 1946) 127, 129, 150.

29 St. Martin of Tours.

had an appearance utterly revolting to human eyes. He was enveloped in fire and, when he raged against the man of God, flames darted from his eyes and mouth. Everyone could hear what he was saying. First he called Benedict by name. Then, finding that the saint would not answer, he broke out in abusive language. 'Benedict, Benedict, blessed Benedict!' he would begin, and then add, 'You cursed Benedict! Cursed, not blessed! What do you want with me? Why are you tormenting me like this?'

From now on, Peter, as you can well imagine, the Devil fought against the man of God with renewed violence. But, contrary to his plans, all these attacks only supplied the saint with further opportunities for victory.

(9) One day while the monks were constructing a section of the abbey, they noticed a rock lying close at hand and decided to use it in the building. When two or three did not succeed in lifting it, others joined in to help. Yet it remained fixed in its place as though it was rooted to the ground. Then they were sure that the Devil himself was sitting on this stone and preventing them from moving it in spite of all their efforts.

Faced with this difficulty, they asked Abbot Benedict to come and use his prayers to drive away the Devil who was holding down the rock. The saint began to pray as soon as he got there, and after he had finished and made the sign of the cross, the monks picked up the rock with such ease that it seemed to have lost all its previous weight.

(10) The abbot then directed them to spade up the earth where the stone had been. When they had dug a little way into the ground they came upon a bronze idol, which they threw into the kitchen for the time being. Suddenly the

kitchen appeared to be on fire and everyone felt that the entire building was going up in flames. The noise and commotion they made in their attempt to put out the blaze by pouring on buckets of water brought Benedict to the scene. Unable to see the fire which appeared so real to his monks, he quietly bowed his head in prayer and soon had opened their eyes to the foolish mistake they were making. Now, instead of the flames the evil spirit had devised, they once more saw the kitchen standing intact.

(11) On another occasion they were working on one of the walls that had to be built a little higher. The man of God was in his room at the time, praying, when the Devil appeared to him and remarked sarcastically that he was on his way to visit the brethren at their work. Benedict quickly sent them word to be on their guard against the evil spirit who would soon be with them. Just as they received his warning, the Devil overturned the wall, crushing under its ruins the body of a very young monk who was the son of a tax collector.

Unconcerned about the damaged wall in their grief and dismay over the loss of their brother, the monks hurried to Abbot Benedict to let him know of the dreadful accident. He told them to bring the mangled body to his room. It had to be carried in on a blanket, for the wall had not only broken the boy's arms and legs but had crushed all the bones in his body. The saint had the remains placed on the reed matting where he used to pray and after that told them all to leave. Then he closed the door and knelt down to offer his most earnest prayers to God. That very hour, to the astonishment of all, he sent the boy back to his work as sound and healthy as he had been before. Thus, in spite of the Devil's attempt to mock the man of God by causing this

tragic death, the young monk was able to rejoin his brethren and help them finish the wall.

Meanwhile, Benedict began to manifest the spirit of prophecy by foretelling future events and by describing to those who were with him what they had done in his absence.

(12) It was a custom of the house, strictly observed as a matter of regular discipline, that monks away on business did not take food or drink outside the monastery.[30] One day, a few of them went out on an assignment which kept them occupied till rather late. They stopped for a meal at the house of a devout woman they knew in the neighborhood. On their return, when they presented themselves to the abbot for the usual blessing, he asked them where they had taken their meal.

'Nowhere,' they answered.

'Why are you lying to me?' he said. 'Did you not enter the house of this particular woman and eat these various foods and have so many cups to drink?'

On hearing him mention the woman's hospitality and exactly what she had given them to eat and drink, they clearly recalled the wrong they had done, fell trembling at his feet, and confessed their guilt. The man of God did not hesitate to pardon them, confident that they would do no further wrong in his absence, since they now realized he was always present with them in spirit.

(13) The monk Valentinian, mentioned earlier in our narrative, had a brother who was a very devout layman. Every year he visited the abbey in order to get Benedict's blessing and see his brother. On the way he always used to fast. Now, one time as he was making this journey he was

30 Cf. L. Doyle, *St. Benedict's Rule for Monasteries* (Collegeville, Minnesota 1948) 51.66.

joined by another traveler who had brought some food along.

'Come,' said the stranger after some time had passed, 'let us have something to eat before we become too fatigued.'

'I am sorry,' the devout layman replied. 'I always fast on my way to visit Abbot Benedict.'

After that the traveler was quiet for a while. But when they had walked along some distance together, he repeated his suggestion. Still mindful of his good resolve, Valentinian's brother again refused. His companion did not insist and once more agreed to accompany him a little further without eating.

Then, after they had covered a great distance together and were very tired from the long hours of walking, they came upon a meadow and a spring. The whole setting seemed ideal for a much needed rest. 'Look,' said the stranger, 'water and a meadow! What a delightful spot for us to have some refreshments! A little rest will give us strength to finish our journey without any discomfort.'

It was such an attractive sight and this third invitation sounded so appealing that the devout layman was completely won over and stopped there to eat with his companion. Toward evening he arrived at the monastery and was presented to the abbot. As soon as he asked for the blessing, however, the holy man reproved him for his conduct on the journey. 'How is it,' he said, 'that the evil spirit who spoke with you in the person of your traveling companion could not persuade you to do his will the first and second time he tried, but succeeded in his third attempt?' At this Valentinian's brother fell at Benedict's feet and admitted the weakness of his will. The thought that even from such a distance the saint had witnessed the wrong he had done filled him with shame and remorse.

PETER

This proves that the servant of God possessed the spirit of Eliseus. He, too, was present with one of his followers who was far away.[31]

GREGORY

If you will listen a little longer, Peter, I have an incident to tell you that is even more astonishing. (14) Once while the Goths were still in power, Totila their king happened to be marching in the direction of Benedict's monastery.[32] When still some distance away, he halted with his troops and sent a messenger ahead to announce his coming, for he had heard that the man of God possessed the gift of prophecy. As soon as he received word that he would be welcomed, the crafty king decided to put the saint's prophetic powers to a test. He had Riggo, his sword-bearer, fitted out with royal robes and riding boots and directed him to go in this disguise to the man of God. Vul, Ruderic and Blidin, three men from his own bodyguard, were to march at his side as if he really were king of the Goths. To supplement these marks of kingship, Totila also provided him with a sword-bearer and other attendants.

As Riggo entered the monastery grounds in his kingly robes and with all his attendants, Benedict caught sight of him and as soon as the company came within hearing called out from where he sat. 'Son, lay aside the robes you are wearing,' he

31 Cf. 4 Kings 5.25-27.

32 The Ostrogoths were a Germanic people from Eastern Europe who had established their kingdom in Italy under Theodoric in 493. King Totila (541-52) was fighting to re-establish Gothic power there after it had virtually been broken by Emperor Justinian's armies during the previous decade. The following events probably took place when Totila was marching on Naples, which he captured in 543.

said. 'Lay them aside. They do not belong to you.' Aghast at seeing what a great man he had tried to mock, Riggo sank to the ground, and with him all the members of his company. Even after they had risen to their feet they did not dare approach the saint, but hurried back in alarm to tell their king how quickly they had been detected.

(15) King Totila then went to the monastery in person. The moment he noticed the man of God sitting at a distance, he was afraid to come any closer and fell down prostrate where he was. Two or three times Benedict asked him to rise. When Totila still hesitated to do so in his presence, the servant of Christ walked over to him and with his own hands helped him from the ground. Then he rebuked the king for his crimes and briefly foretold everything that was going to happen to him. 'You are the cause of many evils,' he said. 'You have caused many in the past. Put an end now to your wickedness. You will enter Rome and cross the sea. You have nine more years to rule, and in the tenth year you will die.'

Terrified at these words, the king asked for a blessing and went away. From that time on he was less cruel. Not long after, he went to Rome and then crossed over to Sicily. In the tenth year of his reign he lost his kingdom and his life as almighty God had decreed.

There is also a story about the bishop of Canosa,[33] who made regular visits to the abbey and stood high in Benedict's esteem because of his saintly life. Once while they were discussing Totila's invasion and the downfall of Rome, the bishop said, 'The city will be destroyed by this king and left without a single inhabitant.'

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33 In southeastern Italy, about 120 miles from Monte Cassino.

'No,' Benedict assured him, 'Rome will not be destroyed by the barbarians. It will be shaken by tempests and lightnings, hurricanes and earthquakes, until finally it lies buried in its own ruins.'[34]

The meaning of this prophecy is perfectly clear to us now. We have watched the walls of Rome crumble and have seen its homes in ruins, its churches destroyed by violent storms, and its dilapidated buildings surrounded by their own debris.

Benedict's disciple Honoratus, who told me about the prophecy, admits he did not hear it personally, but he assures me that some of his own brethren gave him this account of it.

(16) At about the same time there was a cleric from the church at Aquino[35] who was being tormented by an evil spirit. Constantius, his saintly bishop, had already sent him to the shrines of various martyrs in the hope that he would be cured. But the holy martyrs did not grant him this favor, preferring instead to reveal the wonderful gifts of the servant of God.

As soon as the cleric was brought to him, Benedict drove out the evil spirit with fervent prayers to Christ. Before sending him back to Aquino, however, he told him to abstain

34 This conversation is the chief reason why 547 has now been generally accepted as the year of St. Benedict's death. The two were evidently discussing the siege Totila began in October 545, which ended with his capture of the city in December 546. Cf. J. McCann, *St. Benedict* (New York 1937) 208-10. The fulfillment of the first part of St. Benedict's prophecy appears almost miraculous, for on this occasion the king was determined to level the entire city to the ground. He had already demolished a third of its walled defenses and was ready to set fire to all its buildings, when a plea from the shrewd imperial general Belisarius to spare 'the greatest and most glorious of all the cities under the sun, . . . the most wonderful sight in the world,' persuaded him to stop. Cf. T. Hodgkin, *Italy and Her Invaders* IV (Oxford 1896) 500-502.

35 About five miles from Monte Cassino.

from meat thereafter and never to advance to sacred orders.[36] 'If you ignore this warning,' he added, 'and present yourself for ordination, you will find yourself once more in the power of Satan.'

The cleric left completely cured, and as long as his previous torments were still fresh in his mind he did exactly as the man of God had ordered. Then with the passing of years, all his seniors in the clerical state died, and he had to watch newly ordained young men moving ahead of him in rank. Finally, he pretended to have forgotten about the saint's warning and, disregarding it, presented himself for ordination. Instantly he was seized by the Devil and tormented mercilessly until he died.

PETER

The servant of God must even have been aware of the hidden designs of Providence, to have realized that this cleric had been handed over to Satan[37] to keep him from aspiring to holy orders.

GREGORY

Is there any reason why a person who has observed the commandments of God should not also know of God's secret designs? 'The man who unites himself to the Lord becomes one spirit with him,'[38] we read in sacred Scripture.

36 Only the priesthood and the diaconate were regarded as sacred or holy orders before the twelfth century, when the subdiaconate also came to be included among them. Cf. P. de Puniet, *The Roman Pontifical, a History and Commentary,* trans. M. Harcourt (London 1932) 150.

37 Cf. 1 Cor. 5.5.

38 1 Cor. 6.17.

PETER

If everyone who unites himself to the Lord becomes one spirit with him, what does the renowned Apostle mean when he asks, 'Who has ever understood the Lord's thoughts, or been his counselor?'[39] It hardly seems possible to be one spirit with a person without knowing his thoughts.

GREGORY

Holy men do know the Lord's thoughts, Peter, in so far as they are one with Him. This is clear from the Apostle's words,[40] 'Who else can know a man's thoughts, except the man's own spirit that is within him? So no one else can know God's thoughts but the Spirit of God.' To show that he actually knew God's thoughts, St. Paul added: 'And what we have received is no spirit of worldly wisdom; it is the Spirit that comes from God.' And again: 'No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no human heart conceived, the welcome God has prepared for those who love him. To us, then, God has made a revelation of it through his Spirit.'

PETER

If it is true that God's thoughts were revealed to the Apostle by the Holy Spirit, how could he introduce his statement with the words, 'How deep is the mine of God's wisdom, of his knowledge; how inscrutable are his judgments, how undiscoverable his ways!'[41] Another difficulty just occurred to me

39 Rom. 11.34.
40 1 Cor. 2.11,12,9.
41 Rom. 11.33.

now as I was speaking. In addressing the Lord, David the Prophet declares, 'With my lips I have pronounced all the judgments of thy mouth.'[42] Surely it is a greater achievement to express one's knowledge than merely to possess it. How is it, then, that St. Paul calls the judgments of God inscrutable, whereas David says he knows them all and has even pronounced them with his lips?

GREGORY

I already gave a brief reply to both of these objections when I told you that holy men know God's thoughts in so far as they are one with Him. For all who follow the Lord wholeheartedly are living in spiritual union with Him. As long as they are still weighed down with a perishable body, however, they are not actually united to Him. It is only to the extent that they are one with God that they know His hidden judgments. In so far as they are not yet one with Him, they do not know them. Since even holy men cannot fully grasp the secret designs of God during this present life, they call His judgments inscrutable. At the same time, they understand His judgments and can even pronounce them with their lips; for they keep their hearts united to God by dwelling continually on the words of holy Scripture and on such private revelations as they may receive, until they grasp His meaning. In other words, they do not know the judgments which God conceals but only those which He reveals. That is why, after declaring, 'With my lips I have pronounced all the judgments,' the Prophet immediately adds the phrase, 'of thy mouth,' as if to say, 'I can know and pronounce only the judgments You have spoken to me.

42 Ps. 118.13.

Those You leave unspoken must remain hidden from our minds.'

So the Prophet and the Apostle are in full agreement. God's decisions are truly unfathomable. But, once His mouth has made them known, they can also be proclaimed by human lips. What God has spoken man can know. Of the thoughts He has kept secret man can know nothing.

PETER

That is certainly a reasonable solution to the difficulties that I raised. If you know any other miraculous events in this man's life, would you continue with them now?

GREGORY

(17) Under the direction of Abbot Benedict a nobleman named Theoprobus had embraced monastic life. Because of his exemplary life he enjoyed the saint's personal friendship and confidence. One day, on entering Benedict's room, he found him weeping bitterly. After he had waited for some time and there was still no end to the abbot's tears, he asked what was causing him such sorrow, for he was not weeping as he usually did at prayer, but with deep sighs and lamentation.

'Almighty God has decreed that this entire monastery and everything I have provided for the community shall fall into the hands of the barbarians,' the saint replied. 'It was only with the greatest difficulty that I could prevail upon Him to spare the lives of its members.'

This was the prophecy he made to Theoprobus, and we have seen its fulfillment in the recent destruction of his abbey

by the Lombards.[43] They came at night while the community was asleep and plundered the entire monastery, without capturing a single monk. In this way God fulfilled His promise to Benedict, His faithful servant. He allowed the barbarians to destroy the monastery, but safeguarded the lives of the religious. Here you can see how the man of God resembled St. Paul, who had the consolation of seeing everyone with him escape alive from the storm, while the ship and all its cargo were lost.[44]

(18) Exhilaratus, a fellow Roman who, as you know, later became a monk was once sent by his master to Abbot Benedict with two wooden flasks of wine. He delivered only one of them, however; the other he hid along the way. Benedict, who could observe even what was done in his absence, thanked him for the flask, but warned him as he turned to go: 'Son, be sure not to drink from the flask you have hidden away. Tilt it carefully and you will see what is inside.'

Exhilaratus left in shame and confusion and went back to the spot, still wishing to verify the saint's words. As he tilted the flask a serpent crawled out, and at the sight of it he was filled with horror for his misdeed.

(19) Not far from the monastery was a village largely inhabited by people the saintly Benedict had converted from the worship of idols and instructed in the true faith. There were nuns living there too, and he used to send one of his monks down to give them spiritual conferences.

After one of these instructions they presented the monk with a few handkerchiefs, which he accepted and hid away in his habit. As soon as he got back to the abbey he received

43 Monte Cassino was destroyed by Duke Zotto in 589 and was not rebuilt until 720, under Abbot Petronax.

44 Cf. Acts 27.

a stern reproof. 'How is it,' the abbot asked him, 'that evil has found its way into your heart?' Taken completely by surprise, the monk did not understand why he was being rebuked, for he had entirely forgotten about the handkerchiefs. 'Was I not present,' the saint continued, 'when you accepted those handkerchiefs from the handmaids of God and hid them away in your habit?' The offender instantly fell at Benedict's feet, confessed his fault, and gave up the present he had received.[45]

(20) Once when the saintly abbot was taking his evening meal, a young monk whose father was a high-ranking official[46] happened to be holding the lamp for him. As he stood at the abbot's table the spirit of pride began to stir in his heart. 'Who is this,' he thought to himself, 'that I should have to stand here holding the lamp for him while he is eating? Who am I to be serving him?'

Turning to him at once, Benedict gave the monk a sharp reprimand. 'Brother,' he said, 'sign your heart with the sign of the cross. What are you saying? Sign your heart!' Then, calling the others together, he had one of them take the lamp instead, and told the murmurer to sit down by himself and be quiet. Later, when asked what he had done wrong, the monk explained how he had given in to the spirit of pride and silently murmured against the man of God. At this the brethren all realized that nothing could be kept secret from their holy abbot, since he could hear even the unspoken sentiments of the heart.

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45 Cf. Doyle, *St. Benedict's Rule* 54.69-70.

46 Literally 'a protector'; very likely, a 'protector of the municipality' (*defensor civitatis*), the city official who safeguarded the people from exorbitant prices and the dishonesty of private tax collectors. In St. Benedict's time he was one of the most prominent figures in the cities of Italy, a fact which may account for the attitude of this young monk in the following incident.

(21) During a time of famine[47] the severe shortage of food was causing a great deal of suffering in Campania. At Benedict's monastery the entire grain supply had been used up and nearly all the bread was gone as well. In fact, when mealtime came, only five loaves could be found to set before the community. Noticing how downcast they were, the saint gently reproved them for their lack of trust in God and at the same time tried to raise their dejected spirits with a comforting assurance. 'Why are you so depressed at the lack of bread?' he asked. 'What if today there is only a little? Tomorrow you will have more than you need.'

The next day 200 measures of flour were found in sacks at the gate of the monastery, but no one ever discovered whose services almighty God had employed in bringing them there. When they saw what had happened, the monks were filled with gratitude and learned from this miracle that even in their hour of need they must not lose faith in the bountiful goodness of God.

PETER

Are we to believe that the spirit of prophecy remained with the servant of God at all times, or did he receive it only on special occasions?

GREGORY

The spirit of prophecy does not enlighten the minds of the prophets constantly, Peter. We read in sacred Scripture that the Holy Spirit breathes where He pleases,[48] and we should

47 Possibly the great famine of 537-38.
48 Cf. John 3.8.

also realize that He breathes when He pleases. For example, when King David asked whether he could build a temple, the Prophet Nathan gave his consent, but later had to withdraw it.[49] And Eliseus once found a woman in tears without knowing the reason for her grief. That is why he told his servant who was trying to interfere, 'Let her alone, for her soul is in anguish and the Lord has hidden it from me and has not told me.'[50]

All this reflects God's boundless wisdom and love. By granting these men the spirit of prophecy He raises their minds high above the world, and by withdrawing it again He safeguards their humility. When the spirit of prophecy is with them they learn what they are by God's mercy. When the spirit leaves them they discover what they are of themselves.

PETER

This convincing argument leaves no room for doubt about the truth of what you say. Please resume your narrative now, if you recall any other incidents in the life of blessed Benedict.

GREGORY

(22) A Catholic layman once asked him to found a monastery on his estate at Terracina.[51] The servant of God readily consented and, after selecting several of his monks for this undertaking, appointed one of them abbot and another his assistant. Before they left he specified a day on which he would come to show them where to build the chapel, the

49 Cf. 2 Kings 7.
50 4 Kings 4.27.
51 A seaport some thirty miles southwest of Monte Cassino.

refectory, a house for guests, and the other buildings they would need. Then he gave them his blessing.

After their arrival at Terracina they looked forward eagerly to the day he had set for his visit and prepared to receive the monks who would accompany him. Before dawn of the appointed day, Benedict appeared in a dream to the new abbot as well as to his prior and showed them exactly where each section of the monastery was to stand. In the morning they told each other what they had seen, but, instead of putting their entire trust in the vision, they kept waiting for the promised visit. When the day passed without any word from Benedict, they returned to him disappointed. 'Father,' they said, 'we were waiting for you to show us where to build, as you assured us you would, but you did not come.'

'What do you mean?' he replied. 'Did I not come as I promised?'

'When?' they asked.

'Did I not appear to both of you in a dream as you slept and indicate where each building was to stand? Go back and build as you were directed in the vision.'

They returned to Terracina, filled with wonder, and constructed the monastery according to the plans he had revealed to them.

PETER

I wish you would explain how Benedict could possibly travel that distance and then in a vision give these monks directions which they could hear and understand while they were asleep.

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52 Cf. Dan. 14.32-38.

GREGORY

What is there in this incident that should raise a doubt in your mind, Peter? Everyone knows that the soul is far more agile than the body. Yet we have it on the authority of holy Scripture that the Prophet Habacuc was lifted from Judea to Chaldea in an instant, so that he might share his dinner with the Prophet Daniel, and presently found himself back in Judea again.[52] If Habacuc could cover such a distance in a brief moment to take a meal to his fellow Prophet, is it not understandable that Abbot Benedict could go in spirit to his sleeping brethren with the information they required? As the Prophet came in body with food for the body, Benedict came in spirit to promote the life of the soul.

PETER

Your words seem to smooth away all my doubts. Could you tell me now what this saint was like in his everyday speech?

GREGORY

(23) There was a trace of the marvelous in nearly everything he said, Peter, and his words never failed to take effect because his heart was fixed in God. Even when he uttered a simple threat that was indefinite and conditional, it was just as decisive as a final verdict.

Some distance from the abbey two women of noble birth were leading the religious life in their own home. A God-fearing layman was kind enough to bring them what they needed from the outside world. Unfortunately, as is some-

times the case, their character stood in sharp contrast to the nobility of their birth, and they were too conscious of their former importance to practice true humility toward others. Even under the restraining influence of religious life they still had not learned to control their tongues, and the good layman who served them so faithfully was often provoked at their harsh criticisms. After putting up with their insults for a long time, he went to blessed Benedict and told him how inconsiderate they were. The man of God immediately warned them to curb their sharp tongues and added that he would have to excommunicate them if they did not. This sentence of excommunication was not actually pronounced, therefore, but only threatened.

A short time afterward the two nuns died without any sign of amendment and were buried in their parish church. Whenever Mass was celebrated, their old nurse, who regularly made an offering for them, noticed that each time the deacon announced, 'The non-communicants must now leave,' the nuns rose from their tombs and went outside.[53] This happened repeatedly, until one day she recalled the warning Benedict had given them while they were still alive, when he threatened to deprive them of communion with the Church if they kept on speaking so uncharitably.

The grief-stricken nurse had Abbot Benedict informed of what was happening. He sent her messengers back with an oblation and said, 'Have this offered up for their souls during the Holy Sacrifice, and they will be freed from the sentence of excommunication.' The offering was made and after that the nuns were not seen leaving the church any more at the

53 The deacon's words applied to the unbaptized and the excommunicated, who were not allowed to remain for the Mass of the Faithful. Their dismissal took place after the Gospel and sermon.

deacon's dismissal of the non-communicants. Evidently, they had been admitted to communion with our blessed Lord in answer to the prayers of His servant Benedict.

PETER

Is it not extraordinary that souls already judged at God's invisible tribunal could be pardoned by a man who was still living in the mortal flesh, however holy and revered he may have been?

GREGORY

What of Peter the Apostle? Was he not still living in the flesh when he heard the words, 'Whatever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven'?[54] All those who govern the Church in matters of faith and morals exercise the same power of binding and loosing that he received. In fact, the Creator's very purpose in coming down from heaven to earth was to impart to earthly man this heavenly power. It was when God was made flesh for man's sake that flesh received its undeserved prerogative of sitting in judgment even over spirits. What raised our weakness to these heights was the descent of an almighty God to the depths of our own helplessness.

PETER

Your lofty words are certainly in harmony with these mighty deeds.

54 Matt. 16.19.

GREGORY

(24) One time, a young monk who was too attached to his parents left the monastery without asking for the abbot's blessing and went home. No sooner had he arrived there he died. The day after his burial his body was discovered lying outside the grave. His parents had him buried again, but on the following day found the body unburied as before. In their dismay they hurried to the saintly abbot and pleaded with him to forgive the boy for what he had done. Moved by their tears, Benedict gave them a consecrated Host with his own hands. 'When you get back,' he said, 'place this sacred Host upon his breast and bury him once more.'[55] They did so, and thereafter his body remained in the earth without being disturbed again.

Now, Peter, you can appreciate how pleasing this holy man was in God's sight. Not even the earth would retain the young monk's body until he had been reconciled with blessed Benedict.

PETER

I assure you I do. It is really amazing.

GREGORY

(25) One of Benedict's monks had set his fickle heart on leaving the monastery. Time and again the man of God

55 During the first centuries laypeople were permitted to handle the Blessed Sacrament and even keep it in their homes. The practice of placing a consecrated Host on the bodies of those who died in union with the Church was quite common in St. Benedict's time. Cf. A. Rush, *Death and Burial in Christian Antiquity* (Washington 1941) 99-101.

pointed out how wrong this was and tried to reason with him but without any success. The monk persisted obstinately in his request to be released. Finally, Benedict lost patience with him and told him to go.

Hardly had he left the monastery grounds when he noticed to his horror that a dragon with gaping jaws was blocking his way. 'Help! Help!' he cried out, trembling, 'or the dragon will devour me.' His brethren ran to the rescue, but could see nothing of the dragon. Still breathless with fright, the monk was only too glad to accompany them back to the abbey. Once safe within its walls, he promised never to leave again. And this time he kept his word, for Benedict's prayers had enabled him to see with his own eyes the invisible dragon that had been leading him astray.[56]

(26) I must tell you now of an event I heard from the distinguished Anthony. One of his father's servants had been seized with a severe case of leprosy. His hair was already falling out and his skin growing thick and swollen. The fatal progress of the disease was unmistakable. In this condition he was sent to the man of God, who instantly restored him to his previous state of health.

(27) Benedict's disciple Peregrinus tells of a Catholic layman who was heavily burdened with debt and felt that his only hope was to disclose the full extent of his misfortune to the man of God. So he went to him and explained that he was being constantly tormented by a creditor to whom he owed twelve gold pieces.

'I am very sorry,' the saintly abbot replied. 'I do not have that much money in my possession.' Then, to comfort the poor man in his need, he added, 'I cannot give you anything today, but come back again the day after tomorrow.'

56 Cf. Apoc. 12.3-9.

In the meantime the saint devoted himself to prayer with his accustomed fervor. When the debtor returned, the monks, to their surprise, found thirteen gold pieces lying on top of a chest that was filled with grain. Benedict had the money brought down at once. 'Here, take these,' he told him. 'Use twelve to pay your creditor and keep the thirteenth for yourself.'

I should like to return now to some other events I learned from the saint's four disciples who were mentioned at the beginning of this book.

There was a man who had become so embittered with envy that he tried to kill his rival by secretly poisoning his drink. Though the poison did not prove fatal, it produced horrible blemishes resembling leprosy, which spread over the entire body of the unfortunate victim. In this condition he was brought to the servant of God, who cured the disease with a touch of his hand and sent him home in perfect health.

(28) While Campania was suffering from famine,[57] the holy abbot distributed the food supplies of his monastery to the needy until there was nothing left in the storeroom but a little oil in a glass vessel. One day, when Agapitus, a subdeacon, came to beg for some oil, the man of God ordered the little that remained to be given to him, for he wanted to distribute everything he had to the poor and thus store up riches in heaven.[58]

The cellarer listened to the abbot's command, but did not carry it out. After a while, Benedict asked him whether he had given Agapitus the oil. 'No,' he replied, 'I did not. If I had, there would be none left for the community.' This

57 See above, p. 88.
58 Cf. Luke 18.22.

angered the man of God, who wanted nothing to remain in the monastery through disobedience, and he told another monk to take the glass with the oil in it and throw it out the window. This time he was obeyed.

Even though it struck against the jagged rocks of the cliff just below the window, the glass remained intact as if it had not been thrown at all. It was still unbroken and none of the oil had spilled. Abbot Benedict had the glass brought back and given to the subdeacon. Then he sent for the rest of the community and in their presence rebuked the disobedient monk for his pride and lack of faith.

(29) After that the saint knelt down to pray with his brethren. In the room where they were kneeling there happened to be an empty oil-cask that was covered with a lid. In the course of his prayer the cask gradually filled with oil and the lid started to float on top of it. The next moment the oil was running down the sides of the cask and covering the floor. As soon as he was aware of this, Benedict ended his prayer and the oil stopped flowing. Then, turning to the monk who had shown himself disobedient and wanting in confidence, he urged him again to strive to grow in faith and humility.

This wholesome reprimand filled the cellarer with shame. Besides inviting him to trust in God, the saintly abbot had clearly shown by his miracle what marvelous power such trust possesses. In the future who could doubt any of his promises? Had he not in a moment's time replaced the little oil still left in the glass with a cask that was full to overflowing?

(30) One day, on his way to the Chapel of St. John at the highest point of the mountain, Benedict met the ancient Enemy of mankind, disguised as a veterinarian with medicine horn and triple shackle.

'Where are you going?' the saint asked him.

'To your brethren,' he replied with scorn. 'I am bringing them some medicine.'

'Benedict continued on his way and after his prayer hurried back. Meanwhile, the evil spirit had entered one of the older monks whom he found drawing water and had thrown him to the ground in a violent convulsion. When the man of God caught sight of this old brother in such torment, he merely struck him on the cheek, and the evil spirit was promptly driven out, never to return.

PETER

I should like to know whether he always obtained these great miracles through fervent prayer. Did he never perform them at will?

GREGORY

It is quite common for those who devoutly cling to God to work miracles in both of these ways, Peter, either through their prayers or by their own power, as circumstances may dictate. Since we read in St. John that 'all those who did welcome him he empowered to become the children of God,'[59] why should we be surprised if those who are the children of God use this power to work signs and wonders? Holy men can undoubtedly perform miracles in either of the ways you mentioned, as is clear from the fact that St. Peter raised Tabitha to life by praying over her, and by a simple rebuke brought death to Ananias and Sapphira for their lies.[60] Scripture does not say that he prayed for their death, but only that

59 John 1.12.
60 Cf. Acts 9.36-41; 5.1-10.

he reprimanded them for the crime they had committed. Now, if St. Peter could restore to life by a prayer and deprive of life by a rebuke, is there any reason to doubt that the saints can perform miracles by their own power as well as through their prayers?

I am now going to consider two instances in the life of God's faithful servant Benedict. One of them shows the efficacy of his prayer; the other, the marvelous powers that were his by God's gift.

(31) In the days of King Totila one of the Goths, the Arian heretic Zalla, had been persecuting devout Catholics everywhere with the utmost cruelty. No monk or cleric who fell into his hands ever escaped alive. In his merciless brutality and greed he was one day lashing and torturing a farmer whose money he was after. Unable to bear it any longer, the poor man tried to save his life by telling Zalla that all his money was in Abbot Benedict's keeping. He only hoped his tormentor would believe him and put a stop to his brutality. When Zalla heard this, he did stop beating him, but immediately bound his hands together with a heavy cord. Then, mounting his horse, he forced the farmer to walk ahead of him and lead the way to this Benedict who was keeping his money.

The helpless prisoner had no choice but to conduct him to the abbey. When they arrived, they found the man of God sitting alone in front of the entrance reading. 'This is the Abbot Benedict I meant,' he told the infuriated Goth behind him.

Imagining that this holy man could be frightened as readily as anyone else, Zalla glared at him with eyes full of hate and shouted harshly, 'Get up! Do you hear? Get up and give back the money this man left with you!' At the sound

of this angry voice the man of God looked up from his reading and, as he glanced toward Zalla, noticed the farmer with his hands bound together. The moment he caught sight of the cord that held them, it fell miraculously to the ground. Human hands could never have unfastened it so quickly.

Stunned at the hidden power that had set his prisoner free, Zalla fell trembling to his knees and, bending his stubborn, cruel neck at the saint's feet, begged for his prayers. Without rising from his place, Benedict called for his monks and had them take Zalla inside for some food and drink. After that he urged him to give up his heartless cruelty. Zalla went away thoroughly humbled and made no more demands on this farmer who had been freed from his bonds by a mere glance from the man of God.

So you see, Peter, what I said is true. Those who devote themselves wholeheartedly to the service of God can sometimes work miracles by their own power. Blessed Benedict checked the fury of a dreaded Goth without even rising to his feet, and with a mere glance unfastened the heavy cord that bound the hands of an innocent man. The very speed with which he performed this marvel is proof enough that he did it by his own power.

And now, here is a remarkable miracle that was the result of his prayer. (32) One day, when he was out working in the fields with his monks, a farmer came to the monastery carrying in his arms the lifeless body of his son. Brokenhearted at his loss, he begged to see the saintly abbot and, on learning that he was at work in the fields, left the dead body at the entrance of the monastery and hurried off to work. The moment the farmer caught sight of him he cried find him. By then the abbot was already returning from his

out, 'Give me back my son! Give me back my son!'

Benedict stopped when he heard this. 'But I have not taken your son from you, have I?' he asked.

The boy's father only replied, 'He is dead. Come! Bring him back to life.'

Deeply grieved at his words, the man of God turned to his disciples. 'Stand back, brethren!' he said. 'Stand back! Such a miracle is beyond our power. The holy Apostles are the only ones who can raise the dead.[61] Why are you so eager to accept what is impossible for us?'

But overwhelming sorrow compelled the man to keep on pleading. He even declared with an oath that he would not leave until Benedict restored his son to life. The saint then asked him where the body was. 'At the entrance to the monastery,' he answered.

When Benedict arrived there with his monks, he knelt down beside the child's body and bent over it. Then, rising, he lifted his hands to heaven in prayer. 'O Lord,' he said, 'do not consider my sins but the faith of this man who is asking to see his son alive again, and restore to this body the soul You have taken from it.'

His prayer was hardly over when the child's whole body began once more to throb with life. No one present there could doubt that this sudden stirring was due to a heavenly intervention. Benedict then took the little boy by the hand and gave him back to his father alive and well.

Obviously, Peter, he did not have the power to work this miracle himself. Otherwise he would not have begged for it prostrate in prayer.

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61 Cf. Acts 9.36-41; 20.9,10.

PETER

The way facts bear out your words convinces me that everything you have said is true. Will you please tell me now whether holy men can always carry out their wishes, or at least obtain through prayer whatever they desire?

GREGORY

(33) Peter, will there ever be a holier man in this world than St. Paul? Yet he prayed three times to the Lord about the sting in his flesh and could not obtain his wish.[62] In this connection I must tell you how the saintly Benedict once had a wish he was unable to fulfill.

His sister Scholastica, who had been consecrated to God in early childhood, used to visit with him once a year. On these occasions he would go down to meet her in a house belonging to the monastery, a short distance from the entrance.

For this particular visit he joined her there with a few of his disciples and they spent the whole day singing God's praises and conversing about the spiritual life. When darkness was setting in, they took their meal together and continued their conversation at table until it was quite late. Then the holy nun said to him, 'Please do not leave me tonight, brother. Let us keep on talking about the joys of heaven till morning.'

'What are you saying, sister?' he replied. 'You know I cannot stay away from the monastery.'

The sky was so clear at the time that there was not a cloud in sight. At her brother's refusal Scholastica folded her hands on the table and rested her head upon them in earnest prayer.

62 Cf. 2 Cor. 12.7-9.

When she looked up again, there was a sudden burst of lightning and thunder, accompanied by such a downpour that Benedict and his companions were unable to set a foot outside the door.

By shedding a flood of tears while she prayed, this holy nun had darkened the cloudless sky with a heavy rain. The storm began as soon as her prayer was over. In fact, the two coincided so closely that the thunder was already resounding as she raised her head from the table. The very instant she ended her prayer the rain poured down.

Realizing that he could not return to the monastery in this terrible storm, Benedict complained bitterly. 'God forgive you, sister!' he said. 'What have you done?'

Scholastica simply answered, 'When I appealed to you, you would not listen to me. So I turned to my God and He heard my prayer. Leave now if you can. Leave me here and go back to your monastery.'

This, of course, he could not do. He had no choice now but to stay, in spite of his unwillingness. They spent the entire night together and both of them derived great profit from the holy thoughts they exchanged about the interior life.

Here you have my reason for saying that this holy man was once unable to obtain what he desired. If we consider his point of view, we can readily see that he wanted the sky to remain as clear as it was when he came down from the monastery. But this wish of his was thwarted by a miracle almighty God performed in answer to a woman's prayer. We need not be surprised that in this instance she proved mightier than her brother; she had been looking forward so long to this visit. Do we not read in St. John that God is love?[63] Surely

63 Cf. 1 John 4.16.

it is no more than right that her influence was greater than his, since hers was the greater love.

PETER

I find this discussion very enjoyable.

GREGORY

(34) The next morning Scholastica returned to her convent and Benedict to his monastery. Three days later as he stood in his room looking up toward the sky, he beheld his sister's soul leaving her body and entering the court of heaven in the form of a dove.

Overjoyed at her eternal glory, he gave thanks to God in hymns of praise. Then, after informing his brethren of her death, he sent some of them to bring her body to the monastery and bury it in the tomb he had prepared for himself. The bodies of these two were now to share a common resting place, just as in life their souls had always been one in God.

(35) At another time, the deacon Servandus came to see the servant of God on one of his regular visits. He was abbot of the monastery in Campania that had been built by the late Senator Liberius, and always welcomed an opportunity to discuss with Benedict the truths of eternity, for he, too, was a man of deep spiritual understanding. In speaking of their hopes and longings they were able to taste in advance the heavenly food that was not yet fully theirs to enjoy. When it was time to retire for the night, Benedict went to his room on the second floor of the tower,[64] leaving Servandus in the

64 The watchtower just inside the gate of the ancient fortress; cf. n. 28.

one below, which was connected with his own by a stairway. Their disciples slept in the large building facing the tower.

Long before the night office began, the man of God was standing at his window, where he watched and prayed while the rest were still asleep. In the dead of night he suddenly beheld a flood of light shining down from above more brilliant than the sun, and with it every trace of darkness cleared away. Another remarkable sight followed. According to his own description, the whole world was gathered up before his eyes in what appeared to be a single ray of light. As he gazed at all this dazzling display, he saw the soul of Germanus, the Bishop of Capua, being carried by angels up to heaven in a ball of fire.

Wishing to have someone else witness this great marvel, he called out for Servandus, repeating his name two or three times in a loud voice. As soon as he heard the saint's call, Servandus rushed to the upper room and was just in time to catch a final glimpse of the miraculous light. He remained speechless with wonder as Benedict described everything that had taken place. Then without any delay the man of God instructed the devout Theoprobus to go to Cassino and have a messenger sent to Capua that same night to find out what had happened to Germanus.[65] In carrying out these instructions the messenger discovered that the revered bishop was already dead. When he asked for further details, he learned that his death had occurred at the very time blessed Benedict saw him carried into heaven.[66]

65 Capua is about forty miles southeast of Cassino.

66 Germanus died in 541; cf. J. Chapman, *Saint Benedict and the Sixth Century* (London 1929) 125-26.

PETER

What an astounding miracle! I hardly know what to think when I hear you say that he saw the whole world gathered up before his eyes in what appeared to be a single ray of light. I have never had such an experience. How is it possible for anyone to see the whole universe at a glance?

GREGORY

Keep this well in mind, Peter. All creation is bound to appear small to a soul that sees the Creator. Once it beholds a little of His light, it finds all creatures small indeed. The light of holy contemplation enlarges and expands the mind in God until it stands above the world. In fact, the soul that sees Him rises even above itself, and as it is drawn upward in His light all its inner powers unfold. Then, when it looks down from above, it sees how small everything is that was beyond its grasp before.

Now, Peter, how else was it possible for this man to behold the ball of fire and watch the angels on their return to heaven except with light from God? Why should it surprise us, then, that he could see the whole world gathered up before him after this inner light had lifted him so far above the world? Of course, in saying that the world was gathered up before his eyes I do not mean that heaven and earth grew small, but that his spirit was enlarged. Absorbed as he was in God, it was now easy for him to see all that lay beneath God. In the light outside that was shining before his eyes, there was a brightness which reached into his mind and lifted his spirit heavenward, showing him the insignificance of all that lies below.

PETER

My difficulty in understanding you has proved of real benefit, the explanation it led to was so thorough. Now that you have cleared up this problem for me, would you return once more to your account of blessed Benedict's life?

GREGORY

(36) I should like to tell you much more about this saintly abbot, but I am purposely passing over some of his miraculous deeds in my eagerness to take up those of others. There is one more point, however, I want to call to your attention. With all the renown he gained by his numerous miracles, the holy man was no less outstanding for the wisdom of his teaching. He wrote a Rule for Monks that is remarkable for its discretion and its clarity of language. Anyone who wishes to know more about his life and character can discover in his Rule exactly what he was like as abbot, for his life could not have differed from his teaching.

(37) In the year that was to be his last, the man of God foretold the day of his holy death to a number of his disciples. In mentioning it to some who were with him in the monastery, he bound them to strict secrecy. Some others, however, who were stationed elsewhere he only informed of the special sign they would receive at the time of his death.

Six days before he died he gave orders for his tomb to be opened. Almost immediately he was seized with a violent fever that rapidly wasted his remaining strength. Each day his condition grew worse until finally, on the sixth day, he had his disciples carry him into the chapel, where he received the Body and Blood of our Lord to gain strength for his approach-

ing end. Then, supporting his weakened body on the arms of his brethren, he stood with his hands raised to heaven and as he prayed breathed his last.[67]

That day two monks, one of them at the monastery, the other some distance away, received the very same revelation. They both saw a magnificent road covered with rich carpeting and glittering with thousands of lights. From his monastery it stretched eastward in a straight line until it reached up into heaven. And there in the brightness stood a man of majestic appearance, who asked them, 'Do you know who passed this way?'

'No,' they replied.

'This,' he told them, 'is the road taken by blessed Benedict, the Lord's beloved, when he went to heaven.'

Thus, while the brethren who were with Benedict witnessed his death, those who were absent knew about it through the sign he had promised them. His body was laid to rest in the Chapel of St. John the Baptist, which he had built to replace the altar of Apollo.

(38) Even in the cave at Subiaco, where he had lived before, this holy man still works numerous miracles for people who turn to him with faith and confidence. The incident I am going to relate happened only recently.

A woman who had completely lost her mind was roaming day and night over hills and valleys, through forests and fields, resting only when she was utterly exhausted. One day, in the course of her aimless wanderings, she strayed into the saint's cave and rested there without the least idea of where she was. The next morning she woke up entirely cured and left the cave without even a trace of her former affliction. After that she remained free from it for the rest of her life.

67 At present, the generally accepted date for his death is March 21, 547; cf. n. 34.

PETER

How is it that, as a rule, even the martyrs in their care for us do not grant the same great favors through their bodily remains as they do through their other relics? We find them so often performing more outstanding miracles away from their burial places.

GREGORY

There is no doubt, Peter, that the holy martyrs can perform countless miracles where their bodies rest. And they do so in behalf of all who pray there with a pure intention. In places where their bodies do not actually lie buried, however, there is danger that those whose faith is weak may doubt their presence and their power to answer prayers. Consequently, it is in these places that they must perform still greater miracles. But one whose faith in God is strong earns all the more merit by his faith, for he realizes that the martyrs are present to hear his prayers even though their bodies happen to be buried elsewhere.

It was precisely to increase the faith of His disciples that the eternal Truth told them, 'If I do not go, the Advocate will not come to you.'[68] Now certainly the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, is ever proceeding from the Father and the Son.[69] Why, then, should the Son say He will go in order that the Spirit may come, when, actually, the Spirit never leaves Him? The point is that as long as the disciples could see our Lord in His human flesh they would want to keep on seeing Him with their bodily eyes. With good reason, therefore, did He

68 John 16.7 (Confraternity version).
69 Cf. John 15.26.

tell them, 'If I do not go, the Advocate will not come.' What He really meant was, 'I cannot teach you spiritual love unless I remove my body from your sight; as long as you continue to see me with your bodily eyes you will never learn to love me spiritually.'

PETER

That is a very satisfying explanation.

GREGORY

Let us interrupt our discussion for a while. If we are going to take up the miracles of other holy men, we shall need a short period of silence to rest our voices.

BOOK THREE

Prologue

IN DIRECTING MY ATTENTION to our more recent saints, I left those of the more distant past untouched. As a result I have apparently overlooked the miracles of Paulinus, Bishop of Nola, who is of an earlier period and more outstanding than many of the holy men whose memory I am recalling. So, I now am going back to set down briefly whatever facts I can gather about our earlier saints.

The deeds of good men usually become known most quickly to those of similar character. Consequently, our forefathers, who modeled their lives on the example of the saints, were well acquainted with the name of Paulinus. His wonderful life exerted a decisive influence in building up their zeal. Relying on their mature years, I could not but believe what they told me as if I had seen the events with my own eyes.

(1) While Campania was being devastated by the barbarian Vandals during their occupation of Italy, many Italian citizens were carried off into Africa. It was during these difficult days that the man of God, Paulinus, distributed the

furnishings of his episcopal residence to these prisoners and other needy persons until there was nothing whatever left for him to give. Then a widow came to his door complaining that her son had been taken prisoner by the Vandal king's son-in-law. Would the bishop be so kind as to give her money to ransom her son and bring him home, if his master were willing to bargain for his release? Paulinus looked carefully through the house to see what he could find. There was nothing left to give away except himself.

'Woman,' he said, 'I have nothing left to give you. Here, take me! Claim me as your rightful slave. Hand me over into slavery in your son's place and so let him be restored to you.'

Coming from a man of high authority, these words sounded to her more like mockery than compassion. But Paulinus, eloquent as he was and well trained in the art of expression, soon persuaded the doubting woman to put full confidence in his words and not hesitate to hand him over to slavery, bishop though he was, for the ransom of her son.

Both set out for Africa. One day, when the king's son-in-law was passing along, the widow approached him to make her request. First she begged that her son be given back to her. But the haughty barbarian, elated over his temporary prosperity, scorned her request and refused to listen. So she quickly added: 'Sir, I am offering you this man to take my son's place. All I ask is that you have consideration for a mother's love and give me back my son.'

The king's son-in-law looked closely at Paulinus and, noticing his fine features, asked what trade he knew. 'I am not a craftsman,' answered the bishop, 'but I can cultivate a fine garden.'

Highly pleased to hear that Paulinus was skilled in garden-

ing, the barbarian accepted her offer and took the bishop as his slave. The widow then returned to Italy with her son, while Paulinus took up his work as gardener.

The king's son-in-law often came into the garden to inquire about various matters, and soon realized that his servant was a very wise man. Before long he began to neglect the companionship of his old friends for that of his new gardener, whose conversation he enjoyed so much. Paulinus, on his part, brought a fresh supply of fragrant herbs to his master's table every day and received a portion of bread in return. Then he would go back to his work in the garden.

One day, after this had been going for some time, Paulinus said to his master in the course of a private conversation, 'Consider what you are going to do in order to make a proper disposition of the king's domains, because he will soon die a sudden death.'

The son-in-law, who stood higher in royal favor than any one else, did not keep this conversation to himself, but told the king everthing the wise and learned gardener had said. The king was interested and said, 'I wish to see this man of whom you speak.'

'He supplies my table with fresh herbs every day,' his son-in-law answered. 'I will have him bring them here to your table instead, then you can become acquainted with him.'

When the king sat down to his meal, Paulinus came in from his work with various kinds of fragrant herbs and greens to set on the table. The king began to tremble as soon as he caught sight of him, and, beckoning to his son-in-law, revealed to him a fact that he had kept secret till then. 'What you heard is true,' he confessed. 'For last night in a dream I saw judges sitting opposite me in a courtroom and this man was one of them. By their verdict the scourge I had once been

given was taken from my hand. Go, therefore, and find out who he really is, for I suspect that a man of such merit is not the ordinary person he appears to be.'

The son-in-law took Paulinus aside and quietly asked him who he was. 'I am your servant,' answered the saint, 'whom you accepted in the place of the widow's son.'

But when the other insisted and repeatedly urged him to tell what he had been in his own country, not what he was now, the man of God, though bound by a solemn oath, could no longer hide his identity and confessed that he was a bishop.

Hearing this, the barbarian was overawed. 'Ask what you will,' he said. 'Only do not return to your homeland without rich presents from me.'

To this Paulinus answered, 'The best gift you can offer me is to free all my fellow citizens from captivity.'

Without delay, these captives were brought together from different parts of Africa and, as a special act of courtesy to Paulinus, were set aboard ships loaded with grain, to sail back to Italy together with their saintly bishop.

A few days later, the Vandal king died, and so, in fulfillment of God's plan, lost the scourge he had wielded to his own damnation, as well as for the chastisement of the faithful. Paulinus, God's servant, had spoken the truth. Furthermore, by surrendering himself into slavery, he had led a great multitude back to freedom, imitating Christ, who had taken the nature of a slave to rescue us from being the slaves of sin.[1] Following Christ's example, Paulinus had freely chosen the lot of a slave for a time, that he might thereafter enjoy liberty with many.

1 Cf. Phil. 2.7; Rom. 6.15-23.

PETER

Whenever I hear of deeds that I am unable to imitate, I am more inclined to weep than to comment.

GREGORY

The account of Paulinus' last days is contained in the annals of his church. There we read that his death was caused by an inflammation of the side, and that, when he died, the room in which he lay shook with an earthquake, while the rest of the house stood firm. All those present at the time were terrified. Such were the signs that accompanied his soul's departure from his body, and the bystanders who were privileged to witness it were filled with awe.

The virtue of Paulinus which I described above was of an inner, personal nature. If possible, I would now like to consider his external acts of power, his miracles. These are well known and were described to me by persons whose sanctity confirms my belief in them.

(2) In the time of the Goths, John, the very saintly Bishop of Rome, arrived at Corinth on his way to Emperor Justin.[2] Finding himself in need of a saddle horse, he made inquiries for one. A nobleman who heard of this offered the Pope a horse, on condition that it be sent back to him as soon as another suitable one could be found to replace it. This particular horse was his wife's favorite, it was so gentle.

2 Pope John I (523-526) was sent to the court of Constantinople by King Theodoric to persuade Emperor Justin I (518-527) to modify the decree he had enacted against the Arians. Since the mission did not produce its desired results, Theodoric had Pope John and his companions thrown into prison, where in a short time the Pope succumbed to the hardships of his confinement.

The Bishop of Rome therefore continued on his way, and, as soon as the horse could be replaced, he sent it back to the nobleman and his wife. But when the noble lady again wished to mount it, she found herself unable to do so, for, after carrying this distinguished bishop, the horse refused to carry her. It snorted and balked continually as if to indicate openly that it could not seat a woman after having seated the holy pontiff. Her husband, wisely suspecting this, sent the horse back to Pope John with the request that he keep it as his own, for in carrying him the horse had been dedicated to his personal service.

Our forefathers also tell us that when John came to Constantinople he restored sight to a blind man in the presence of an immense throng that had gathered at the gate which is called 'the Golden Gate.' As he placed his hand on the eyes of the man who asked to be cured all darkness was lifted from them.

(3) A short time later the saintly Agapitus,[3] whom by the grace of God I had the honor to succeed to the throne of Peter here in Rome, was also sent east by the Goths to Emperor Justinian on matters of state. While he was passing through Greece, an invalid who could neither speak nor stand up was brought to him to be cured. When the weeping relatives set him down before the man of God, he asked them with great concern whether they truly believed it possible for the man to be cured. They answered that their confident hope in his cure was based on the power of God and the authority of Peter. Agapitus turned immediately to prayer, and so began the celebration of Mass, offering the holy Sacrifice to almighty God. As he left the altar after the Mass he took the lame man by the hand and, in the presence of

3 Pope Agapitus I (535-536).

a large crowd of onlookers, raised him from the ground till he stood erect. When he placed the Lord's Body in his mouth, the tongue which had so long been speechless was loosed. All those present were struck with wonder and wept for joy. Fear and reverence filled their minds, for they saw what a marvelous deed Agapitus had been able to accomplish by the power of God through the intercession of St. Peter.

(4) During the reign of the same Emperor, Bishop Datius of Milan, having been exiled for his faith, went to Constantinople. On his way he stopped at Corinth, where he looked for a house suitable to accommodate his entire retinue. After a fruitless search he noticed a house some distance away of the exact size he needed, and ordered it to be set in readiness. But the townspeople told him that he would not be able to stay in that house because the Devil had inhabited it for many years. In fact, that was the reason why it had been standing idle all this time. Datius answered, 'All the more reason for us to take up our residence there, since the evil spirit haunts it and drives all human occupants away.' And so, after converting the house into his living quarters, he entered it fearlessly to await the onslaught of Satan.

In the dead of night, when the man of God was sleeping, the ancient Enemy of manking began to create a terrible din, imitating the roaring of lions, the bleating of sheep, and the screaming of mules, as well as the hissing of serpents and the squealing of pigs and mice. Awakened by the cries of all these animals, Datius got up and with a voice full of indignation loudly denounced the evil spirit. 'It serves you right, you wretch,' he said. 'You are the one who said, "I will ascend above the height of the clouds, I will be like the Most High."[4] Because of your pride you have become like

4 Isa. 14.14.

a pig and a mouse. Because you basely wished to imitate God, you find yourself now imitating animals as you deserve.'

Hearing this, the evil spirit blushed, as it were, at his own wretchedness. For surely he must have felt ashamed, since he did not come back again to make these horrible disturbances. Because one person of real faith had entered the house, the deceitful and treacherous spirit departed, never to return. Thereafter, the house was again occupied by the faithful.

But now I must leave the past to rest in silence and begin to tell about our own times.

(5) Some saintly men well known in the province of Apulia testify to the following very popular account of Sabinus, Bishop of Canosa. As the story goes, he became totally blind in his old age. When Totila, king of the Goths, heard that the saintly bishop had the spirit of prophecy, he gave no credence to the report but sought an occasion to put it to a test. When he reached the neighborhood of Canosa, Bishop Sabinus invited him to dinner. In taking their places at table, the king refused to recline but sat down instead at the bishop's right. The servant came as usual to hand Sabinus the cup of wine. On this occasion, however, the king quietly reached out and taking the cup from the servant handed it on to the bishop with his own royal hands, He did this to find out whether through some power of spiritual vision Sabinus would be able to tell who was offering him the cup. The bishop took it and, though he could not see the one who was serving him, said, 'Long live your hand.' The king was embarrassed at the words, yet rejoiced, for, though detected, he had found what he was looking for in the man of God.

This holy man's life was a model of right living for his followers. But as he lived on to an advanced age, his arch-

deacon, an ambitious man, impatient to take over the episcopal see, planned to poison him. For this purpose he offered the boy who waited at table a bribe if he would serve the bishop wine mixed with poison. The servant agreed, and during the next meal offered the holy man a cup of poisoned wine. As he was holding it out, the bishop said abruptly, 'Take the cup you are offering me and taste of it yourself.'

Terrified at realizing he was discovered, the servant preferred to drink the poison and die than await punishment for his terrible crime. As he put the cup to his lips, the man of God relented. 'Do not drink,' he said, 'but give me the cup. I will drink it. And now go and say to him who gave it to you: "I, Sabinus, drink the poisoned cup, yet you will not become bishop." ' Then, making the sign of the cross, he drank the poison without suffering any ill effects. At that moment the archdeacon died. Though he was in a different place, it seemed as if the poison had passed from the bishop's lips into the archdeacon's body. The actual poison had no power to kill the one, while the other, by a sentence of the eternal Judge, perished by the poison of his own malice.

PETER

These are great wonders and most amazing for our times! This man's way of life is remarkable, and one who is acquainted with it need not be surprised at his miracles.

GREGORY

(6) I must not omit the story repeated again and again by many persons coming to me from the city of Narni. In the days of the Goths when Totila, their king, came to Narni,

he was met by its bishop, the saintly Cassius. Seeing the prelate's face deeply flushed and not knowing that this was due to his natural complexion, the king felt contempt for him, attributing his ruddy color to habitual drinking. But almighty God had a way of showing that a very saintly man was being slighted. While the king was still with his men in the field around Narni, his sword-bearer was seized by the Devil and cruelly tormented in the presence of the whole army. He was brought to the man of God while Totila looked on. With a prayer and the sign of the cross the saint promptly drove out the evil spirit, barring him from ever returning again. From that day on, the barbarian king had great esteem in his heart for the man of God whom he had despised because of a facial blemish. Now that he recognized the great powers of a saint, his haughty attitude toward the bishop changed.

(7) As I discuss the lives of these great men, the memory of Andrew, Bishop of Fondi, and the wonderful mercy God showed him, comes back to me. And I earnestly pray that the account of it may influence my readers at least to this degree that if they have dedicated their lives to chastity they may no longer presume to have women living in their homes, for ruin creeps into the mind all the more readily when the object desired is present to minister to sinful inclinations. Nor is the story I am going to tell fictitious. There are almost as many witnesses for it as there are people in that place.

This revered man led a most virtuous life and with priestly watchfulness kept himself secure in the stronghold of self-control. Yet he was unwilling to dismiss from his episcopal residence a holy woman who had served him in the past. Being confident of his own and her self-control, he allowed her to remain. This gave the ancient Enemy of mankind an

opportunity to introduce tempations to his soul. He began by keeping a vivid image of the woman before the bishop's imagination in order to lure him on to sinful thoughts.

One day, a Jew going from Campania to Rome was passing along the Appian Way. Evening was coming on when he arrived at Fondi. Unable to find lodging for the night, he decided to stay in the temple of Apollo which was close at hand. Fearing the unholiness of the place, he took the precaution of fortifying himself with the sign of the cross even though he did not have the faith.

The dreadful solitude of the place disturbed him and he was still lying wide-awake at midnight. Suddenly, there appeared before his eyes a crowd of evil spirits parading along like a guard of honor before some potentate. The master spirit himself sat down in the middle of the temple and began a formal investigation of each of his followers in order to find out how much wickedness each had done. As the spirits came up one by one to be tried, they reported what harm they had done to virtuous souls. One of them jumping up before the assembled crowd proclaimed how he had stirred up in the heart of Bishop Andrew a temptation of the flesh by haunting him with an image of the religious woman who lived in the episcopal residence. The master spirit listened with avid ears, believing his gain to be all the greater because the soul of a very holy man was sliping down the paths of death. His attitude encouraged the spirit on trial to add a further detail, by relating how on the previous evening he had induced the holy man to give the woman a caressing pat on the back. Then the evil spirit, that ancient Enemy of the human race, encouraged his minion to complete what he had begun and win for himself an outstanding prize in ruining this great man.

While the Jew, lying there wide-awake, was looking on with terror and expectation, the same spirit who directed this troop of fawning subjects ordered them to find out who it was that dared to lie down in the temple. Going up to the Jew and looking sharply at him, they were surprised to see him signed with the mystery of the cross. 'Woe to us,' they said, 'woe to us! An empty vessel signed with the cross.' Then the whole troop of evil spirits disappeared.

Frightened by what he had seen, the Jew got up quickly and hurried off to the bishop. He found him in his church and immediately calling him aside inquired into the nature of the temptation he was suffering. Very much embarrassed, the bishop would not confess. So the Jew accused him of casting sinful looks on the handmaid of God. The bishop still refused to acknowledge his guilt. Then the Jew said: 'Why do you evade my questions, you who were yesterday persuaded to pat that woman on the back?' Now the bishop realized that his fault was known, so he humbly confessed what he had obstinately refused to admit before. In addition to reminding him of his shameful act, the Jew went on to disclose the source of his information by relating how he had overheard the evil spirits discussing his case at their assembly. The bishop fell to his knees in prayer. Within a short time he dismissed from his house not only this handmaid of God but every woman in his employment. Soon after, he had the temple of Apollo turned into a chapel in honor of St. Andrew the Apostle. From that time on he was competely free of these shameful temptations. The Jew, whose vision and rebuke had saved the good man, was in turn brought to eternal salvation, for, after receiving instructions in the mysteries of the faith, he was cleansed by the waters of baptism and brought into the fold of the Church. In saving his

neighbor this son of Abraham attained his own salvation. Through God's providence it so happened that the preservation of the one from sin became the occasion for the other's conversion.

PETER

The deeds you tell move me to fear and hope.

GREGORY

That is as it should be. We should always trust in the mercy of God and stand in fear of our own infirmity. You have heard how a cedar of paradise was severely shaken, but not uprooted. Because of our weakness we were filled with fear; but again, seeing its steadfastness, we regained confidence.

(8) There was another man of saintly life, Constantius, the former Bishop of Aquino, who died recently during the reign of my predecessor, Pope John.[5] Many of his close acquaintances testify to the fact that he had the spirit of prophecy. Of the great number of marvels told about him, the following is vouched for by devout and truthful men who were present when it happened. On the day of his death the people of Aquino gathered round him to weep over the pending loss of their loving father. Full of grief they asked him, 'Whom shall we have as a father when you are gone?' In answer he gave them this prophetic reply: 'After Constantius you shall have a mule driver and after him a fuller. This, too, must you endure, O Aquino!' With these words he breathed his last.

After his death the pastoral care of Aquino was taken over

5 Pope John III (561-574).

by Andrew, his deacon, who had been employed as a caretaker of post horses on the public highways. When he died, Jovinus, at one time a fuller in Aquino, was elevated to be its bishop. During his lifetime the inhabitants of the city were so reduced in number by the sword of barbarians and a fierce pestilence that after his death no one could be found to be bishop, nor could he have found a flock over which to preside. And so, in fulfillment of God's decree, the church at Aquino was left without a shepherd after the death of Constantius' two successors.

(9) I must not omit an account that was brought to my attention more than two years ago by the saintly Venantius, Bishop of Luni. He told me that Frigdianus, Bishop of Lucca, a neighboring city, was a man of marvelous spiritual power. As evidence he related the story of a most unusual miracle, much talked about by the inhabitants of that city.

The Serchio River, which flows along the walls of Lucca, often overflows its banks and, forsaking its natural course, floods the adjoining territory, destroying whatever crops there are in gardens or fields. The frequent occurrence of this catastrophe and the extreme poverty of the inhabitants induced them to give careful thought to a project for diverting the course of the river through other areas. But, no matter how much time and effort they spent at the work, the river could not be turned from its natural channel. So the man of God, Frigdianus, went down to the river with a little hoe he had made and knelt down in prayer. Then he traced a furrow with his hoe and commanded the river to follow him through whatever regions he decided to go. The whole mass of water followed the man of God and broke a new channel for itself along the furrow marked out by the holy man's implement. The old river bed was left completely empty.

After this, there were no more floods to damage the grain fields or gardens plots from which the inhabitants gained their sustenance.

(10) Bishop Venantius also told me of a miracle which took place in the city of Piacenza. All the details mentioned by him are verified by John, a man known for his honesty, who was born and raised in that city and is now city prefect here at Rome. According to the story, one of the bishops of Piacenza, Sabinus by name, was a man possessed of miraculous powers. One day his deacon reported that the Po River had overflowed its banks, flooding the church properties. Furthermore, all the lands where the people were expecting to reap a fine harvest were standing under water. Sabinus told his deacon to go to the river and say: 'The bishop commands you to control yourself and return to your channel.' But the deacon laughed scornfully at this command. The man of God then called for his secretary and dictated this message: 'Sabinus, servant of the Lord Jesus Christ. An instruction to the Po River. I command you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ never more to leave your channel, never more to devastate the lands belonging to the church.'

When the message had been written down, he ordered his secretary to cast it into the waters of the Po. As soon as the document touched the waters the river began to recede from the church lands and thereafter never again dared to flood the adjacent territory, but remained within its proper limits.

What do we see here, Peter, but the stubborn disobedience of man put to shame by the obedience of an unreasoning element miraculously carrying out the commands of a saint?

11) In our times the saintly Cerbonius, Bishop of Populonia, gave strong proof of his sanctity. Always zealous in

showing hospitality, he had one day invited to his house a few soldiers who were passing through the city. Some barbarian Goths, however, arrived unexpectedly, and Cerbonius was forced to hide his guests in order to save them from harm. When Totila, the cruel Gothic king, heard of this his fierce anger was aroused, and he ordered Cerbonius to be brought before him. As it happened, the king had encamped with his army in a place eight miles from Populonia called Merulis. Here the saintly bishop was condemned to be devoured by wild bears for the entertainment of the people. When the heartless king had taken his seat for the spectacle, a great number of people gathered round from all sides. The bishop was then led into the open space to be clawed to death by a ferocious bear specially chosen for the occasion that the king might satisfy his cruel wrath. The bear, driven from his den in a state of frenzy, made straight for the bishop. But suddenly, losing his ferocity, he bent down in humble submission and began to lick the feet and hands of the holy man. The hearts of men had been brutal toward the bishop, as all could now see, while the brute beast acted with a heart almost human. The people who had come to watch the bishop die began spontaneously to demonstrate their admiration for him with shouts and cheers. The king himself was moved to honor the sanctity of the holy bishop. Though he had previously refused to honor God by protecting the saint's life, this encounter with God's judgment disposed him to imitate the meekness of the bear. Some of those who were at the scene are still living and claim that they were part of the crowd that witnessed the miracle.

Venantius, Bishop of Luni, called my attention to another miracle performed by this holy man. He had prepared a burial place for himself at Populonia in the church over

which he presided. During the Lombard invasion, however, accompanied as it was by a general destruction of properties in Italy, the saint withdrew to the island of Elba. There a serious illness overtook him, and, as death was near, he commanded the attending clergy to bury him in the tomb he had prepared at Populonia. But they answered that it was quite impossible to bring him to that place because the Lombards had taken it over and were infesting every part of it. To this Bishop Cerbonius answered: 'Take me to Populonia. Nothing will happen to you. So do not be afraid, but hasten to take care of my burial. As soon as you have buried me, leave the place with all speed.'

After the bishop died his body was placed aboard ship to be taken to Populonia. On the way across the sea storm clouds gathered, and a violent downpour of rain followed. Yet not a drop fell on the ship during the entire twelve-mile journey from Elba to Populonia, even though the storm raged on all sides. Now everyone was convinced that the ship was carrying the remains of a very holy man. Arriving safely at Populonia, the clergy placed the body of their bishop in the tomb. Then, complying with his instructions, they hurried back with all speed to the ship. They had no sooner boarded it when Grimaret, the cruelest of the Lombards, entered the place of burial. His coming at this time shows that the man of God had the spirit of prophecy, since he had commanded his ministers to hasten with all speed from the scene of burial.

(12) The miracle of a divided rain, such as I described above, appears also in the celebrated life of another bishop. An elderly man, a member of the clergy, told me that he was a witness to the miracle. There are his words: 'Bishop Fulgentius, who presided over the church in Otricoli, had found an implacable enemy in Totila, the king of the Goths.

When this utterly heartless ruler entered the neighboring territory with his army, the bishop took great care to appease his anger by sending him gifts, intending thereby, if possible, to soften his fury. But at sight of them the king turned away in scorn. In an outburst of rage he commanded his men to take the bishop into strict custody and hold him for trial. These fierce Goths, carrying out the designs of their cruel master, seized the bishop and, crowding about him, forced him to stand in one spot. They even traced a circle around him in the sand across which he was not to set foot. While he stood in this narrow circle, exposed to the burning sun and surrounded by hostile Goths, a severe thunderstorm suddenly came up, accompanied by a downpour of rain too violent for the captors to endure. Yet not a drop from all this downpour fell within the circle where the man of God, Fulgentius, was standing. This fact was immediately reported to the Gothic king, with the result that his harsh attitude was changed to one of great respect for the bishop he had cruelly wished to punish. Almighty God uses lowly instruments to direct the force of His miracles against haughty minds. And so it is through humble men that the Lord of truth subdues those who proudly rise up against the law of heaven.

(13) Recently, too, Floridus, a bishop of saintly life, related a very remarkable miracle. 'Herculanus,' he said, 'the Bishop of Perugia, who was my guardian, was a very holy man. He had been taken out of his monastery to be made bishop. During the terrible days of King Totila, the heretic, the Gothic army had held the city under continual siege for seven years. Many of the citizens had fled because they could not endure the peril of famine. The seventh year was coming to an end when the army gained entrance to the city. The officer in charge of the army sent messengers to the king,

inquiring what he intended to do with the bishop and the people. In reply, the king ordered him first to cut a thong of skin from the bishop's body, running from head to foot, and then to decapitate him. The people of the city were to be put to the sword. The officer, therefore, had Herculanus brought to the walls of the city and executed. Then, cutting a long furrow into the dead body to make it appear that a thong of skin had been removed, he cast the remains outside the walls.

Moved by human compassion, a few of the citizens took up the remains and buried them next to the walls, being careful to place head and body properly together. The body of a child that had been killed during this incident was buried there with the bishop.

Forty days after this brutality, Totila gave orders that all the citizens of Perugia should return from their places of refuge without any misgivings. Those who had previously fled to escape famine accepted the invitation and returned. Remembering the saintly life of their bishop, they immediately looked for the place where he lay buried, for they wished to show him the honor he deserved by interring him in the Church of St. Peter the Apostle.

When they dug away the earth at the burial place, they discovered the body of the child in an advanced stage of decomposition after these forty days. The body of the bishop, however, was as sound as if it had been buried that same day. More marvelous still, the head was perfectly joined to the body without a sign of the beheading. They turned the body over to see whether any marks of the long incision remained. Here, too, the body was perfectly intact, as though no knife had ever touched it.

PETER

Who would not stand in awe before miracles like these? They are performed for the dead to awaken us, the living.

GREGORY

(14) In the early years of the Goths there was a holy man near Spoleto named Isaac. He survived almost to the end of the Gothic period. Many of our people knew him, especially the saintly virgin Gregoria, who now lives here in Rome near the Church of Blessed Mary Ever Virgin. As a young girl, after everything had been prepared for her marriage, she fled from home and sought refuge in a church, determined to live a holy life consecrated to God. The saintly Isaac defended her and, under God's protection, her desire to enter religious life was fulfilled. Because she had fled from an earthly marriage she was worthy to have a spouse in heaven. The saintly Eleutherius, whose good life strengthens my faith in his words, told me a great deal about his dear friend Isaac. Though Isaac was not born in Italy, I will tell of the miracles he performed while living here.

When he first came to Spoleto from Syria, he entered a church and begged the sacristans to let him pray there as long as he wished, without requiring him to leave during the peaceful hours of the night. He immediately gave himself to prayer and spent the entire day at it, continuing right on through the night. The second day and night he prayed in the same way, prolonging it to a third day and night without interruption. One of the sacristans, who was filled with a spirit of pride, noticed him and, taking scandal where he should have been edified, began rudely to call the holy man

a pretender and imposter who was only making himself a public spectacle by praying three days and three nights. Then he ran up to the man of God and struck him on the cheek, demanding that he leave the church, because such actions were but a shameful pretence at holiness.

Just then the avenging spirit seized the sacristan and, casting him at the holy man's feet, began to complain in a loud voice, 'Isaac is casting me out, Isaac is casting me out.' Isaac was a complete stranger at Spoleto, but the evil spirit, by loudly acknowledging Isaac's power to expel him, made his name known to all. The man of God quickly knelt over the body of the afflicted man, and the evil spirit departed. The whole city soon heard what had happened in the church. Men and women of high and low station came in great numbers, outdoing one another in trying to get Isaac to visit their homes. Some offered him estates on which to build a monastery, others offered money, still others simply wished to assist him in whatever way they could. But the man of God left Spoleto without accepting any of these offerings. A short distance from the city he came upon a secluded spot where he built himself a humble dwelling.

Inspired by his god example to seek eternal life, many people flocked to him, dedicating themselves to the service of God under his guidance and direction. When these disciples continued humbly to insist that for the good of the monastery he should accept the gifts that were being offered, he held firmly to his purpose, conscientious guardian of poverty that he was, and replied, 'A monk who seeks possessions here on earth is no monk.' He was as cautious to secure his poverty against loss as the avaricious are to guard their perishable wealth.

The spirit of prophecy and the great miracles he performed

in this place made his life shine like a brilliant light for all the people of that area.

Toward evening one day he bade his monks put a supply of iron tools, such as spades and hoes, into the garden and return directly. That night, after rising with his monks to sing God's praises, he said to them, 'Go now and cook the porridge for our workmen so that it will be ready in the morning.' At dawn he had the monks take the porridge and proceed with him to the garden. There they found strangers busily at work, each using one of the tools that had been placed there the evening before. These strangers had all been thieves, but now, converted at heart, they were inspired to work with the tools they had found. From the time they entered the garden until the man of God came to them, they had spaded and hoed all the areas that needed cultivation. As soon as the man of God stepped into the garden he said, 'Be of good cheer, my brothers. You have worked hard. Take a rest now.' With that he set the meal before them, bidding them refresh themselves after their exhausting labor. When they had satisfied their hunger, he warned them against doing any further wrong. 'Whenever you want anything from the garden,' he said, 'come to the entrance and quietly make your request. You shall receive what you ask, and a blessing will accompany you. But do not steal.' Without further delay he had a generous supply of fresh vegetables given to each one. The thieves who had come to the garden with evil intent went away clear of guilt, and fully rewarded besides for their labor by the good man Isaac.

At another time, some strangers, ragged and half-naked, came to Isaac begging for mercy. The man of God listened silently while they pleaded for clothing to cover their nakedness. Summoning one of his disciples, he quietly directed

him to go to a certain spot in the woods where he would find a hollow tree. 'Examine that tree,' he said, 'and bring me the clothes you find hidden there.' The disciple followed the directions and found everything as Isaac said. Taking the clothes from the hollow tree, he brought them secretly to his master, who showed them to the half-naked strangers. 'Come,' he said, 'since you are in dire need of clothes, take these and put them on.' They instantly recognized, to their confusion, that these were the clothes they had laid aside. Since they had dishonestly begged clothes from others, they now got back their own in shame.

At another time someone who wanted to recommend himself to Isaac's prayers sent him two baskets of food. The servant who was to deliver them kept one basket for himself, hiding it on the way, and brought the other to the man of God. 'With this gift,' he said, 'my master is requesting prayers for his intention.' The man of God accepted the basket graciously and, as he expressed his thanks, also gave the boy a warning. 'Be sure,' he said, 'to examine the basket you set down by the roadside. Examine it with great caution, for a serpent has crawled into it. If you handle it carelessly the serpent will strike you! So look out!'

The boy blushed uneasily at these words, yet was glad to have escaped death. But he could not help feeling downhearted, for even though the rebuke was salutary, it carried with it the sting of shame. Returning to the basket, he examined it closely but cautiously and found the serpent, just as the man of God had said.

In spite of the fact that the saintly Isaac was endowed to a unique degree with the virtue of abstinence, contempt for worldly goods, the spirit of prophecy and steadfastness in prayer, he had one trait that seemed reprehensible—at times

he gave way to extreme joviality. On such occasions, anyone who did not know of his great virtues would never have believed that he possessed them in abundant measure.

PETER

Tell me, please, what explanation we can give for this? Did he of his own accord observe no restraint in mirth, or was he so strong in virtue that his soul, in spite of his reluctance, was swept along in such expressions of joy?

GREGORY

Almighty God shows wonderful providence in distributing His blessings. Frequently, by denying lesser gifts to those whom He has favored with great virtues, He offers their souls an opportunity for self-reproach. When they find themselves unable to reach the perfection they aspire to and see themselves struggling in vain for a mastery of virtues not granted them, they are not likely to pride themselves on the gifts they have received. For, when they see that of their own power they are incapable of overcoming small faults and slight imperfections, they begin to realize that their great virtues were not self-acquired. For a similar reason the Lord destroyed the powerful enemies who beset His chosen people on their way to the Promised Land, but allowed the Philistines and Chanaanites to survive, so that, as it is written, 'He might try Israel by them.'[6] Sometimes, as I have said, those who have received exceptional graces are the very ones God allows to retain small imperfections so that they may always have obstacles with which to contend. As a result they

6 Judges 3.4.

do not foster pride in their hearts even though they are victorious over powerful enemies, for they realize that the weakest of adversaries still causes them great weariness. It is quite remarkable how one and the same person can be vigorous in virtue and weak with infirmity, and while strongly fortified on one side see himself laid waste on the other. The good, therefore, for which he is striving without success, makes him cherish humbly the gifts God has given him.

Why should we be surprised that this is true of men? Heaven itself witnessed the same occurrence, for some of its citizens were lost and some stood firm. Seeing one part fall through pride, the other, the chosen angels, kept their stand more humbly and therefore also more firmly. This loss, then, was beneficial for those citizens of heaven whom it helped to establish more firmly in their eternal condition. The same is true of us individually. A slight loss that safeguards humility can at times be of immense profit to a soul.

PETER

I agree with what you say.

GREGORY

(15) I must not fail to mention what I was told by the priest Sanctulus, who comes from the same district. I am sure you are well enough acquainted with the honesty of his life to put full trust in his words.

At that time there were two men in Norcia, Eutychius and Florentius, who lived a life truly in harmony with their monastic profession. Eutychius, filled with spiritual zeal and fervor, was very active in converting souls to God by his holy

exhortations. Florentius, on the other hand, lived a simple life dedicated to prayer. A monastery not far from their dwelling had lost its superior through death, and the monks now asked Eutychius to preside over them. Consenting to their wishes, he took over the direction of the monastery and for many years guided the souls of its monks in the pursuit of sanctity. In order not to abandon his former house of prayer, he had Florentius remain there.

One day, this saintly man cast himself prostrate on the floor of the chapel, begging almighty God to send him some consolation in his solitude. After finishing his prayer, he went out and found a bear standing in front of the door. The animal bowed its head to the ground and by its unusually mild and gentle actions let Florentius know that it had come to serve him. The man of God was quick to grasp its meaning. A little flock of four or five sheep had been left there and was without shepherd or watchman. So he entrusted it to the bear, saying, 'Go, drive this flock to pasture and return again at noon.'

The bear listened to his instructions and faithfully carried out the role of shepherd entrusted to him. This animal, by nature a devourer of sheep, curbed its native appetite and pastured them instead. On days when the man of God wished to fast, he ordered the bear to return with the sheep at midafternoon, otherwise at noon. All these commands the bear carried out faithfully without ever confusing the hours by returning at midafternoon instead of noon or vice versa.

After this marvel had been going for some time, the report of it spread throughout the entire region. But, in his envy, the ancient Enemy invariably drags evil men to their shame through the very deeds that make good men shine with glory. The monks of the monastery became envious of Flo-

rentius because he was becoming renowed through this great miracle, whereas they could boast of no miracle for their master Eutychius. So, one day, four of their number waylaid the bear and killed it.

When the bear did not return at the usual hour, Florentius became suspicious. He waited till sunset, and still there was no sign of the bear. What a misfortune! In his great simplicity he called him 'brother bear.' The next day, going out to see what had happened to his sheep and shepherd, he found the bear dead. A careful inquiry soon brought to light the perpetrators of the wrong. Weeping more because of the malice of the monks than over the death of the animal, he was brought to Eutychius, who tried to console him. But Florentius, distracted with grief, pronounced a curse on the monks then and there in the presence of Eutychius. 'I hope to God,' he exclaimed, 'that before they die they will be punished in the sight of all for killing my bear who never did them any harm.'

Divine retribution followed quickly. The four monks who had killed the bear were struck with leprosy and died a horrible death. Overwhelmed with terror at having cursed these brethren, Florentius wept for the rest of his life over the terrible fulfillment of his imprecations. He accused himself of cruelty. 'In their death,' he kept repeating, 'I have become a murderer.' It may be that almighty God brought this about in order to prevent Florentius from ever again presuming to hurl the weapons of malediction in a state of anger.

PETER

Do we really need to consider it a very serious matter if in a fit of anger we should happen to curse someone?

GREGORY

Why do you ask me about the gravity of this sin, wh St. Paul himself says, 'it is not . . . the bitter of speech . that will inherit the kingdom of God.'[7] Consider how gra it must be if it separates us from the kingdom of heaven.

PETER

What if a man, not out of malice, but inadvertently, hu a curse at his neighbor?

GREGORY

Even an idle word is condemned by the severity of o Judge. Imagine how much more deserving of condemnati will be a harmful word prompted by ill will, when an id word, one merely lacking in positive good, is liable to punis ment.

PETER

I agree.

GREGORY

Florentius performed another deed which should not l left unmentioned. After his renown had become known f and wide, a deacon came from a great distance to see hi eager to recommend himself to his prayers. As he approach the saint's dwelling, he noticed that all the surrounding ar was infested with serpents. In mortal fear he shouted, 'Serva of God, pray for me!'

The sky was clear when Florentius stepped out of h

7 1 Cor. 6.10.

hermitage. Raising his eyes and arms to heaven he prayed God to remove this pest in whatever way He wished. At his voice the heavens suddenly shook with loud crashes of thunder that struck all the serpents dead. Seeing their lifeless forms lying about, the servant of God said, 'You have destroyed them, Lord, but who will now remove them?' He had hardly finished speaking when a flock of birds came, and as each one carried off a serpent, the entire area around this house of prayer was soon cleared.

PETER

What virtue do we attribute to him, or what merit, that God should be so very near to answer his call?

GREGORY

Purity of heart and simplicity are most precious in the sight of almighty God, who is all pure and simple in nature. Set apart from the ways of the world, the servants of God are strangers to its vain talk and thus avoid disturbing and soiling their minds in idle conversation. Because of this they win a hearing from God sooner than others, for by the purity and simplicity of their thoughts they resemble God to a degree, becoming of one mind with Him as far as that is possible. But we who mingle with so many worldly people frequently speak useless words and at times even very injurious ones. And the closer we keep our speech to earth, the farther we remove our voice from God. We are drawn downward by mingling in continual conversation with men of the world. It is with good reason that Isaias, after seeing the Lord, the King of hosts, accuses himself of this very

fault. In a spirit of repentance he says, 'Woe is me, because I have held my peace; because I am a man of unclean lips.'[8] And why are his lips unclean? Because, as he explains immediately, 'I dwell in the midst of a people that has unclean lips.' Grieving that his own lips are unclean, he shows us that he contracted this defilement by living among a people that had unclean lips.

To take part in the talk of worldly men without defiling our own heart is all but impossible. If we permit ourselves to discuss their affairs with them, we grow accustomed to a manner of speech unbecoming to us, and we end clinging to it with pleasure and are no longer entirely willing to leave it. We enter upon the conversation reluctantly, as a kind of condescension, but we find ourselves carried along from idle words to harmful ones, from trivial faults to serious guilt, with the result that our lips are more defiled with foolish words, and our prayers farther and farther removed from God's hearing. Just as Scripture says, 'When one turns away his ears from hearing the law, even his prayer is an abomination.'[9] Why should we be surprised, then, if God is slow to hear our petitions when we on our part are slow to hear God's command or pay no attention whatever to it? It was quite natural for Florentius to receive a ready answer to his prayer because he was quick to listen to God's law.

PETER

What can one say in answer to this clear reasoning?

8 Isa. 6.5.
9 Prov. 28.9.

GREGORY

Eutychius, who had been Florentius' companion on the way of perfection, became renowned for his miracles only after death. Among the many wonders his townspeople tell about him there is the remarkable miracle of the cloak which God saw fit to work repeatedly down to these days of Lombard occupation. Whenever the rains failed and the earth was parched by the intense heat of a long drought, the citizens would gather together and display the saint's garment before God, holding it aloft as they went in a procession of prayer through the fields. Invariably, God would send rains to refresh the thirsty soil. From this miracle it is clear that Eutychius had great hidden virtues and merits, for the public display of his cloak turned aside the wrath of God.

(16) In recent years there was a saintly man by the name of Martin, who had lived the life of a hermit for many years in a narrow cave on Mount Massico in Campania. Many of our people knew him and were witnesses to his miraculous deeds. I also heard much about him from Pope Pelagius,[10] my predecessor of happy memory, and from other God-fearing men.

The first miracle took place in his narrow cave. As soon as he made his home there, water began to trickle from the rock that formed the cave and flowed in sufficient quantity to supply his daily needs, never furnishing too much and never failing when needed. Through this miracle almighty God showed how carefully He watched over His saint, for in imitation of the ancient miracle He provided him in the wilderness of his retreat with cool water from a hard rock. But the old Enemy of mankind, envying the virtue of the

10 Pope Pelagius II (578-590).

man of God, devised a scheme for driving him from the cave. He took the form of a serpent, long his friend, and tried to frighten Martin into abandoning his solitude. The serpent began to haunt the cave, remaining there alone with the saint, stretching itself in front of him when he prayed and lying at his side when he slept. The saint, however, completely unafraid, would hold out his hands or his foot to the serpent saying, 'Strike, if you have been given leave to do so. I will not prevent you.' After three years of such attempts, the evil spirit finally gave way before the saint's fearlessness. Hissing with a rage, he fled down the steep mountainside into the ravine below, destroying all the shrubs in his path with the flames that shot from the serpent's body. In burning the mountainside in his flight, the conquered spirit was compelled by God to show what terrible powers he actually possessed. Consider, then, my dear Peter, on what spiritual heights the man of God stood who for three years was unafraid to lie down to sleep with this serpent at his side.

PETER

I was filled with astonishment as I listened.

GREGORY

In the first years of his life as hermit this man decided to avoid the sight of women, not that he despised them, but because he feared the temptations it might cause. On hearing this, a certain woman boldly climbed the mountain and impudently made her way to his enclosure. Seeing someone approaching from a distance and recognizing a woman's clothing, Martin prostrated himself in prayer with his face

to the ground, and remained in that position until the impudent woman went away, tired of looking in at the window. God's displeasure with this unholy attempt of hers to disturb the saintly hermit was made manifest to all, for that very day in climbing down the mountain the woman met her death.

A spirit of piety and devotion brought many people to Martin's cave. The path they had to follow in order to reach him was very narrow and ran along a steep cliff. One day a little boy, running along carelessly, fell off the cliff into the ravine below. The mountain was very high at this place, and the huge groves of trees growing in the valley appeared like little shrubs as you looked down. Everyone was deeply concerned, and a careful search was made to recover the body, for all were certain that the poor boy was dead. His body could not possibly have remained intact in its fall since it would have been shattered on the sharp rocks that jutted out from the cliff on every side. But the boy was found alive! Not only that—he was uninjured. This was clear proof that no harm came to the boy because Martin's prayers protected him in his fall.

A large boulder projected from the cliff above the cave. Its connection with the cliff proper was very slight, and there was constant danger that it would break off and in its fall destroy the cave and kill the saintly hermit. Accordingly, Mascator, a nephew of the illustrious Armentarius, came with a large crowd of country people, asking Martin to leave his cave temporarily, for they wished to dislodge the boulder. After that he would be able to live in his cave without constant fear.

The holy man would not accept their proposal. Instead, he told Mascator to do what he could, while he himself retired

to the very back of the cave. There was not the slightest doubt in anyone's mind that the massive boulder in its fall would crush both cave and hermit. The men, therefore, tried in every way to remove the dangerous mass of rock without imperiling Martin's life. A marvelous thing then happened for all to see. As soon as the huge mass was loosened by the men, it lunged forward, jumping over Martin's cave as if shying away from injuring the man of God, and disappeared down the hill. Those who believe in God's providential direction of human affairs will also realize that this miracle was willed by Him and carried out by His angels.

When Martin first came to this mountain, before he had shut himself up in the cave, he fastened an iron chain to his foot and fixed the other end of it into a rock, thus removing all possibility of going any farther than the length of chain would allow.

When the saintly Benedict, of whom I spoke previously, heard of this, he sent one of his disciples to Martin with this message: 'If you are a servant of God you ought to be bound by the chain which is Christ and not by a chain of iron.' Obedient to this advice, Martin immediately loosed the chain, but never again set foot beyond the space to which it had confined him. Having now cast the chain aside, he kept himself within the narrow circle as strictly as before.

Afterwards, when he had shut himself up in the cave, he began to attract disciples. They lived in a place separate from the cave and had to draw water for their daily use from a well. But the rope on which the bucket hung broke frequently. So the disciples asked Martin for the chain he had discarded, and, attaching one end of it to the rope, fastened the other end to the bucket. From that time on the rope no longer broke, though it was dipped into the water

every day. After touching Martin's chain it acquired the durability of iron.

PETER

These deeds are delightful because they are miraculous, and they have the special attraction of being recent.

GREGORY

(17) In our lifetime there was a subdeacon of the church at Buxentum by the name of Quadragesimus, who used to graze his sheep near Aurelia. This truth-loving man told of a remarkable deed very quietly performed.

In the days when he was tending his sheep in the district of Aurelia, there lived on Mount Argentarius a holy man wearing the habit of a monk and living a life in harmony with his profession. He used to come down from the mountain every year to the Church of St. Peter, Prince of the Apostles, in order to visit Quadragesimus and enjoy his hospitality.

On one occasion, when he entered the subdeacon's hospice located near the church, the husband of a poor woman of the neighborhood had just died. The body was washed as usual, clothed, and covered with a linen cloth, but burial had to be postponed because it was now late evening. During the night the widow sat near the body of her deceased husband, giving way to her grief with weeping and loud lamentation. Since she kept up these expressions of sorrow and wept without ceasing, the saintly guest was moved to compassion and said to Quadragesimus, 'The woman's grief touches me. Come, pray a while with me.'

So they went to the nearby church and prayed. After some time the servant of God asked the subdeacon to conclude the

prayer. Then, after going to the altar to gather dust from its base, he proceeded with Quadragesimus to the corpse and knelt down to pray at its side. After kneeling there in prayer for some time, he did not ask the subdeacon to conclude the prayer as before, but gave the blessing himself and got up at once. Still holding the dust from the altar in his right hand, he used his left to remove the cloth which covered the face of the dead man. When the woman saw this she began to object vigorously, for she wondered what he intended to do. But he removed the cloth and rubbed the dust from the altar over the dead man's face, continuing to do so until life gradually returned. Soon the dead man began to breathe. Then, opening his eyes, he raised himself to a sitting posture and looked around like one waking from a deep sleep, greatly surprised at all the commotion about him.

Seeing her husband alive, the wife, exhausted though she was from grief, broke into a fresh display of emotion. Her tears now were tears of uncontrolled joy. The man of God restrained her outburst with a mild command. 'Calm yourself, my dear woman,' he said. 'And if anyone should ask you how this happened, tell him simply that the Lord Jesus Christ was here doing His work.' With these words he left his friend's hospice, never again to return. In order to escape earthly honors he took the precaution of not being seen again by those who had watched him perform this impressive miracle.

PETER

I do not know what others may think, but for me the mightiest of all miracles is that which causes the dead to live again by calling their souls back from the world of the unseen.

GREGORY

If we judge from what is visible we cannot conclude otherwise. But if we consider the invisible, then it becomes evident that to convert a sinner by preaching the word of God to him and aiding him with our prayers is a greater miracle than raising to life the physically dead. For in the latter case the flesh is brought back to life, only to die again; in the former, the soul is brought to life for all eternity.

If I propose two instances of miracles, will you tell me which one of them you think exemplifies the more powerful miracle?

Lazarus, whom we believe to have always been a good and faithful man, was revived from bodily death. Saul, on the other hand, experienced a resurrection of the spirit. After Lazarus came back to life, we hear nothing further about his virtues, whereas our minds are too weak even to grasp all that the Scriptures tell us about the virtues of Paul after his soul was raised to life. The dark and cruel thoughts of his heart were changed to tender charity; he longed to die for the brethren at whose death he had once rejoiced; he, a scribe versed in all Scriptural learning, considered that he had no other knowledge 'than that of Jesus Christ, and of Him as crucified'; he willingly endured being beaten with rods for Christ, whom he had persecuted with the sword; though he was raised to high honors by his apostolic calling, he freely chose to become a little one in the midst of his disciples.[11] Even when he was carried up into the third heaven,[12] he turned his eyes earthward in sympathy to provide for the proper ordering of the marriage bed. 'Let every man,'

11 Cf. Rom. 9.3; 1 Cor. 2.2; 2 Cor. 11.25; 1 Cor. 15.9; Eph. 3.8:
12 Cf. 2 Cor. 12.2.

he says, 'give his wife what is her due, and every woman do the same by her husband.'[13] While he was mingling in contemplation with hosts of angels, he did not think it beneath him to consider the needs of the flesh and make provision for it. He rejoiced in infirmities and was well content with insults. For him life meant Christ, and death was a prize to be won. The real life that he lived here in the flesh was beyond the flesh.[14] This was the life of St. Paul, who rose from a spiritual lower world to a life of charity. To be raised to life from bodily death is, therefore, not of the highest importance, unless, perhaps, when this resurrection of the body is accompanied by a spiritual resurrection; for then the external miracle produces internal life in the one so revived.

PETER

I had very little esteem for what I now realize is incomparably sublime. Please continue this discussion, so that the time at our disposal may not slip by without bringing us some edification.

GREGORY

(18) A confrere of mine in monastic life, a diligent student of the Bible and somewhat older than I, used to instruct me in many matters of which I was ignorant. He told me of a man named Benedict who lived conscientiously according to monastic rule, about forty miles from Rome. He was young in years, but his manner of life showed unusual maturity. In the days of Totila, some Goths passing that way decided to burn him to death in his hermitage. In the process they

13 1 Cor. 7.3.
14 Cf. 2 Cor. 12.10; Phil. 1.21; Gal. 2.20.

burned everything around the hut, but the structure itself remained untouched.

Infuriated at this, the Goths dragged Benedict from his hut and threw him into an oven nearby, which was being heated for baking bread. The next day the holy man was found safe and sound. His flesh was untouched by the fire, and not even the fringes of his garments were scorched.

PETER

I am reminded of the old story of the three youths in the fiery furnace. They, too, remained untouched by the flames.

GREGORY

That miracle, I believe, is somewhat different. There were, first of all, three youths, and they were thrown into the fiery furnace with their hands and feet tied, and the next day the king found them fully dressed walking about in the furnace. We see, therefore, that the flames, which had in no way damaged their clothes, had destroyed the bonds that tied their hands and feet. And so the fire, acting in the service of the just, helped them by retaining its natural violence, and at the same time, by not retaining it, did them no harm.

(19) Something very similar occurred in our days, but in connection with a different element. In a recent conversation with the tribune John, I found out that Count Pronulfus was a witness to the occurrence. He says that when he was stationed in that region he happened to be present with King Autharic at the very time when the miracle took place. This is the story as I heard it from the tribune. About five years ago, the Tiber here at Rome flooded its banks.

Rising above the height of the city walls, it inundated large sections of Rome. The Adige River at Verona, too, was in a state of flood at this time, and its waters reached the Church of St. Zeno, Bishop and Martyr. The doors of the church stood open, yet the water did not flow inside, even though it continued to rise until finally it reached the windows close to the roof. Having mounted to that height, the water blocked the doorway completely. It was as if the liquid were turned into a solid wall. The large crowd of people in the church at the time had no way of getting out, surrounded as they were on all sides by a solid mass of water. The prospect of death by hunger and thirst began to frighten them, but, on going up to the door, they found that they could draw water for drinking even though, as I said, it stood in a solid mass all around them, as high as the windows but without seeping into the church. One could draw from it for ordinary use, yet it had lost its ordinary power of flowing like a liquid. So it stood in front of the church to make manifest the power of the holy martyr. It kept its natural qualities in order to benefit the people, yet discarded them in order not to flood the church. Now you know why I said that this miracle was not unlike the ancient miracle of the fire which spared the garments of the three youths, but destroyed their bonds.

PETER

The works of the saints as you relate them are marvelous indeed, and this weak generation of ours must stand amazed at them. Now that I have heard about these saints of Italy and their exceptional virtues, I would like to know whether

any of them were tried by the wiles of Satan and, if so, what benefit they gained from it.

GREGORY

There is no palm of victory without the toil of battle. How can one be victorious if one does not fight against the treachery of Satan, our enemy? This malicious spirit constantly besets our thoughts, words and actions, looking at all times for evidence to bring against us on the day of judgment. You wish to know how intent he is on leading us astray?

(20) Some of our own people can vouch for the truth of the story I am going to tell you. It concerns the saintly Stephen, a priest in the province of Valeria and a relative of our Boniface, the deacon and administrator of the church. Returning home from a journey one day, he said in a rather thoughtless way to his servant, 'Come, you devil, and take off my boots.' At this command the bootstrings began to untie themselves with all speed—a clear indication that the devil whom he had addressed was there to obey him. Terrified at this, the priest shouted in protest, 'Go away, you wretch! Leave me! I was not speaking to you, but to my servant.'

The devil departed at once, leaving the boots almost completely unlaced. From this you can judge how intent he is on leading our minds astray, since he is so ready to do even physical work.

PETER

It must be an exhausting and harrowing experience to remain in the front lines of battle, fighting continually against an insidious enemy.

GREGORY

It will not be too difficult if we entrust our safe-keeping to God's grace and not to our own efforts. But even under His divine protection we must continue to be as vigilant as possible. Once the Devil has been expelled from the mind, it often happens through the working of divine grace that his position is reversed. Instead of being feared, he himself flees in terror before the virtues of holy souls.

(21) I am going to tell you a story for the truth of which the saintly old man Eleutherius, whom I mentioned above, will be my witness. There was a young woman in Spoleto filled with a strong desire to lead the religious life. She was of marriageable age, the daughter of a state official. In spite of her father's attempts to stop her from entering this way of life, she took the religious habit. As a result she was disinherited, receiving as her sole share half of a small farm. Inspired by her example, many other young ladies of the upper class turned from a worldly life to serve almighty God with her in the holy state of virginity. One day, the saintly abbot Eleutherius cam to instruct and encourage her. As they sat there speaking about the word of God, a tenant of the estate she had received as the portion of her inheritance came to her with a gift. Just as he presented himself to them, he fell to the ground and under the compulsion of an evil spirit began to writhe in pain and bleat noisily. The holy nun arose and with an angry look on her face exclaimed, 'Leave this man, you wretch! Leave him, I say!' The Devil answered through the voice of the possessed man, 'And if I leave him, into whom shall I enter?'

A small pig happened to be feeding nearby. So, when the

nun commanded him to enter into it, the evil spirit promptly left the man and entered the pig, killed it, and departed.

PETER

I would like to know whether she ought to have allowed even a pig to come under the control of the evil spirit.

GREGORY

The deeds of Christ, who is Truth itself, are the norms set up for our conduct. Was it not to Him that the entire legion of devils in the possessed man directed their words? 'If thou hast a mind to cast us out, they said, send us into the herd of swine.'[15] And Christ, after casting them out, allowed them to enter the swine and drive them over the precipice.

From this we know, too, that without God's permission the evil spirit has no power against mankind, for he could not even have entered into the swine if God had not allowed it. We must therefore subject ourselves of our own free will to Him to whom all opposing forces must subject themselves even against their will. By doing so we become stronger than our enemies, for through our humility we become one with the Creator of the universe. Is it surprising, then, if God's chosen followers perform wonders during their lifetime? Even in death it is not uncommon for their bones to be alive with miraculous power.

(22) The following incident, related to me by Abbot Valentio of happy memory, occurred in Valeria. A pious priest of that province was leading a monastic life with his clergy,

15 Matt. 8.31.

intent on good works and the praises of God. The day of death overtook him and he was buried in front of the church. It so happened that the way to the sheepfold, which was nearby, led through the place of his burial.

One night while the clergy was in church reciting the Office, a thief came to the sheepfold and left quickly with a stolen sheep on his shoulders. When he was about to pass the grave of the saintly priest, he was suddenly rooted to the ground, unable to move a foot. Taking the sheep down from his shoulders, he wanted to set it free, but was unable to do so; his hands would not let go of the sheep. So he stood there bewildered, caught with the booty, unable to get rid of it or to run off with it. He who had feared detection by the living was now, miraculously, held fast by the dead. Bound as he was hand and foot, he remained on the spot unable to move.

In the morning, after the praises of God were ended, the clergy came out of the church and found this stranger holding the sheep. At first sight it was hard to tell whether he was taking the sheep or making an offering of it. But the culprit could not hide his guilt very long. Amazed that through the merits of the saintly man of God the thief should stand before them unable to get rid of the booty, they began at once to pray and only through fervent prayer were they able to obtain his release. After standing there all this time forced to hold on to the stolen sheep, the thief could finally take his departure, once again free and unburdened.

PETER

The graciousness of almighty God toward us becomes apparent in these delightful miracles.

GREGORY

(23) The monastery of St. Gregory, Peter, that home of saintly men, stands on a mountain overlooking the city of Palestrina. It is from there I got the next story I am going to tell. I was still living in my monastery when I first heard it and was assured by the monks that they had accurate knowledge of the facts.

By carefully supervising the spiritual development of one of his monks, a holy abbot of St. Peter's had led him to a high degree of sanctity. Seeing that he had made remarkable progress in the fear of God, the abbot had him ordained priest for the monastery. Soon after his ordination, however, this priest was informed through a revelation that death would overtake him in a short time. Going immediately to his abbot, he asked leave to prepare a burial place for himself. The abbot granted his request, but added: 'Be assured that I going to die before you. However, prepare your grave as you requested.'

The priest did so. A few days later the abbot was overcome by a fever. As he was nearing death he turned to the priest standing at his side and said, 'Lay my body to rest in your grave.'

The priest objected. 'You know,' he said, 'that in a short time I, too, will die, and the grave will not hold both our bodies.' But the abbot insisted. 'Go,' he said, 'and do as I directed. The grave will hold both of us.' And so the abbot was buried in the priest's grave.

The priest also took sick shortly after and died. His body was taken to the same place for burial. On opening the grave, everyone attending the funeral saw that it was

impossible to bury the priest in it because the abbot's body, already buried there, took up all the space. Seeing this difficulty, one of the monks who was pallbearer exclaimed, 'Father Abbot, what of your promise that the grave would hold both of you?'

At these words the body of the abbot, which lay stretched out before them just as it had been laid to rest, turned on its side, leaving room for the priest. Thus in the sight of all he fulfilled after death the promise he had made while still alive.

This miracle took place in the Monastery of St. Peter the Apostle. If you do not mind, I should now like to tell you about the sacristans of the church in Palestrina where the holy abbot's body lies buried.

PETER

Please do. It will be a pleasure to listen.

GREGORY

(24) There are still some people in Palestrina who remember Theodore, the sacristan of their church. He is the one who told me of a remarkable personal experience he had in this church. One morning he got up very early to trim the lamps at the church door. While he was standing under the lamp on the wooden platform regularly used for this purpose, St. Peter the Apostle suddenly appeared to him, wearing a white garment. As he stood there on the floor below Theodore, he said, 'Friend, why did you get up so early?' With this he vanished from sight. An overpowering fear lay hold

of Theodore, robbing him of all bodily strength and confining him to bed for many days, unable to rise.

With this vision the blessed Apostle wished to assure his followers that he was watching over them constantly and would always see to it that what they did out of veneration for him would be repaid with an eternal reward.

PETER

To me the surprising thing is, not that St. Peter became visible, but that Theodore, who had been in perfect health, became sick at the sight of him.

GREGORY

Why are you surprised at this, Peter? Have you forgotten the words of the Prophet Daniel, who trembled at the sight of his mighty and terrifying vision? 'I became weak,' he said, 'and was sick for some days.'[16] The flesh is overwhelmed by the things of the spirit. Sometimes, therefore, when the mind is allowed to see beyond its human powers, the body cannot but grow weak, because the task imposed is more than it can endure.

PETER

Your clear explanation has removed the difficulty I had in understanding.

16 Dan. 8.27.

GREGORY

(25) Not so very long ago, as our elders tell us, there was a sacristan of this church named Acontius, a man of extraordinary humility and gravity. His fidelity in the service of almighty God was recognized by St. Peter the Apostle, who showed by a miracle how highly he esteemed him for it.

One of the girls in the parish was a paralytic. Since her lower limbs were completely paralyzed, she used to creep along, supported only by her hands, while her body dragged over the ground. For a long time she had been praying to St. Peter for a cure. Then, one night, he stood at her side and said, 'Go to Acontius the sacristan. Speak to him and he will give you back your health.'

Putting full faith in this remarkable vision, she made her way to the church, dragging herself through different parts of it in the hope of finding Acontius. Just then he happened to come her way, and she, not knowing him, said, 'Father, can you tell me where to find Acontius the sacristan?' 'I am Acontius,' he replied. Eagerly she gave her message. 'Our shepherd,' she said, 'the feeder of our flock, St. Peter the Apostle, sent me to you to be cured of this affliction.'

'If you have been sent by him,' Acontius answered, 'then get up on your feet.' With this he took her by the hand and raised her to a standing position. From that moment all the nerves and muscles of her body were restored to health and all signs of paralysis disappeared completely.

If I should try to describe all the marvels that happened in this one church, I would not be able to tell of the miracles that took place in any other church. Therefore I will now again take up the modern saints of Italy and give the story of their remarkable lives.

(26) Recently, there was a man named Menas, who lived the life of a holy solitary in the province of Samnium. He was known to many of our people, for he died only about ten years ago. I am not going to name any particular person as the source of my story, because the witnesses for it are nearly as numerous as the people familiar with the province.

This holy solitary had nothing from which to supply his needs except a few beehives. When a Lombard tried to rob him even of these, the holy man gave him a sharp rebuke. Instantly, the barbarian fell to the ground at the saint's feet, violently tormented by the evil spirit. With this miracle the name of Menas became as renowned among the barbarians as it was among the people of Samnium. Thereafter, no one would enter his dwelling except with deep humility.

Often, bears would come out of the neighboring forest to to eat up his beehives. Whenever the holy man saw them coming, he would beat them off with a wooden cane he used to carry with him. And these ferocious beasts would grunt and growl as they fled in terror from the blows of the small rod, though ordinarily even swords do not frighten them.

It was his determination not to have anything or look for anything in this world. His zeal urged him to stir up the hearts of all his kind visitors with a longing for eternal life. If as times he noticed faults in some of them, he would not fail to rebuke them. But when he used harsh words, he always strove to speak from a heart burning with the fire of charity.

His neighbors and some friends, who lived a considerable distance away, had made it a practice to send him offerings on certain days of the week to enable him to exercise hospitality toward his visitors. At one time, a landowner by the name of Carterius, overcome by passion, seduced a woman

who had vowed her life to God, and then persuaded her to enter an illicit marriage with him. When the man of God heard of this, he gave him a well-deserved reprimand through friends he could trust. Because of a guilty conscience, Carterius did not dare visit the man of God, fearing the rebukes the saint usually gave wrong-doers. Therefore, he arranged to have his usual gifts sent along with the offerings made by the rest. In this way he thought Menas would receive his donation without knowing it. When all the offerings were placed before the holy man, he sat down and without a word began to examine them individually, arranging them all neatly in one place, except the gifts of Carterius. These he pushed aside with disdain, recognizing them through the power of the spirit. 'Go,' he said, 'and tell Carterius: "You have robbed God of His offering, and you send gifts to me? I will not accept your gifts because you have robbed God of His!" ' The hearts of those present were filled with profound dread because of the deep insight with which the saint judged men in their absence.

PETER

Many of these holy men, I believe, would have accepted martyrdom if they had lived in days of persecution.

GREGORY

There are two kinds of martyrdom, Peter, one that is secret and one that is public. Martyrdom is secret or hidden whenever the soul is eager and ready for suffering even if there is no open persecution. The Lord Himself assures us in the Gospel that martyrdom is possible without public suffering. For,

when the sons of Zebedee, still weak in understanding, were seeking higher honors, Christ said to them, 'Have you strength to drink of the cup I am to drink of?' And when they answered, 'We have,' he said: 'You shall indeed drink of my cup; but a place on my right or my left is not mine to give.'[17] Now the word 'cup' must stand for the 'chalice of suffering.' And we all know that of these two disciples James suffered a violent death, while John died quietly at a period when the Church was enjoying peace. From this we can conclude with full assurance that there is a martyrdom without external suffering. Was it not St. John who was told that he would drink the cup of the Lord, though he did not die as the result of a persecution?

In referring to the saints I mentioned above, men of outstanding quality, why should we say that they would have been martyrs had they lived during times of persecution? Did they not endure the assaults of a hidden enemy? Did they not love their enemies in this world? Did they not resist every carnal desire? By sacrificing themselves in this way to almighty God on the altar of their hearts they became true martyrs even in times of peace. In our own days, on the other hand, persons of very ordinary and even worldly life, about whom I would not have dared entertain much hope for eternal glory, have won for themselves the crown of martyrdom because the occasion presented itself.

(27) About fifteen years ago, as we are told by eye-witnesses of the event, the Lombards held forty of our country people prisoners and were trying to compel them to eat meat that had been offered to idols. When our people put up a firm resistence, refusing to touch the sacrilegious meat, the Lombards threatened them with death unless they complied.

17 Matt. 20.22,23.

In spite of this, our people remained true to their faith. They chose eternal life in preference to this transitory one and so met their death together, all persevering in the faith to the end. Without a doubt these were martyrs to the truth, because they chose to suffer death by the sword rather then offend their Creator by eating of the forbidden meat.

(28) It was during this same period that the Lombards, holding as prisoners some 400 other persons, were performing their customary rite of sacrificing the head of a goat to the Devil, dedicating it to him by running around, singing sacrilegious songs. After bowing in adoration before this idol, they tried to compel the prisoners to do the same. But the vast majority refused to obey the sacrilegious commands. Rather than hold on to this mortal life by adoring the idol, they chose the way to life eternal through death. Having always bowed their heads in adoration before their Creator, they would never do so before a creature. Their captors were infuriated at this and in their fury put to the sword all who did not take part in the idolatrous worship.

Now, in the case of those who held to a martyr's difficult life in times of peace by continuous acts of self-denial, do we have any reason to wonder whether or not they would have become martyrs during a persecution? Why should we wonder on their account, especially when many win the martyr's crown in times of persecution who in peaceful days followed the wide and easy paths of this world?

What I say of heroic souls does not apply to everyone. For, as we know, when persecution rages, many undergo martyrdom who were far from perfect while the Church enjoyed peace, whereas some of those whom we believed to stand firm in the previous days of calm fall away through fear and weakness. Of those, however, whom we described

above, we can confidently say that they would have become martyrs; all the more so, since their holy death confirms our conclusion. Seeing that they persevered to the very end in practicing hidden virtues, we can also be sure that they would not have betrayed their faith in times of open persecution.

PETER

It is as you say. But I marvel at the dispensations of God's mercy toward us, His unworthy creatures. For He keeps a check on the fury of the Lombards by not allowing their unholy priests, who look upon themselves as directors of our people, to attack the faith of the orthodox Christians.

GREGORY

(29) This is what they repeatedly tried to do, Peter, but some marvel from heaven always opposed them. I will tell you about one instance which was described to me three days ago by Boniface, a monk of my own monastery. Four years ago he was still with the Lombards. Once, one of the Lombard bishops, an Arian of course, came to Spoleto. Not finding a place to celebrate his services, he went to the bishop of the city and asked for a church to use for his heretical rites. The bishop refused emphatically. The Arian promptly declared he would return the very next day and take over the nearby Church of St. Paul by force. When the sacristan heard this, he rushed quickly to the church, shut all the doors and bolted them securely. Toward evening he extinguished all the lamps and hid inside the building.

Early next morning the Arian bishop came with a large mob, prepared to break down the doors. Suddenly, some

supernatural force shook the doors, sending the bars and bolts flying in every direction. With a terrible crash every door of the church flew wide open. Then a light streamed down from above and relighted all the lamps inside. The Arian bishop who had to come to do violence to the church was struck blind and had to return home led by the hand. When the Lombards stationed in this region heard what happened, they did not dare cause any more disturbances among Catholics.

The miracle is noteworthy for the way it took place. The lamps in the church had at first been extinguished because of the Arian bishop; then, at the very moment light was restored to the church, the bishop lost his sight.

(30) I should also mention the remarkable events that occurred in this city two years ago, for they are signs from God clearly manifesting His condemnation of the Arian heresy. Some of them are based on popular accounts, and for others I have the testimony of the priest and the sacristans of the Church of St. Paul.

An Arian church in the section of the city called Subura had remained closed until two years ago when it was decided to dedicate it to the Catholic faith. The relics to repose there were those of St. Sebastian and St. Agatha. We proceeded to the church with an immense throng of people, singing songs of praise to almighty God. On entering the church for the celebration of Mass, the people had to crowd close together because of lack of space. Some of those who stood outside the sanctuary were disturbed by a pig running back and forth through the crowd. Though the people could not see the animal, they felt it scurrying over their feet. During the general commotion that followed, the pig found its way out through the church door. In this way God helped us to

realize that the unclean spirit had departed from the building.

After Mass we went home. That night, a loud noise was heard coming from the top of the church, as of someone running back and forth over the roof. The second night, the noise became louder and suddenly burst into a terrifying explosion as if the entire church had been blasted from its foundation. Then peace and quiet returned, never again to be disturbed. From the terrible noise we can judge under what overwhelming power the Devil was forced to leave the place he had so long occupied.

A few days later a cloud appeared out of a serene sky and settled over the altar, shrouding it with a veil of mist and at the same time filling the air with a sweet fragrance. An atmosphere of awe pervaded the church and kept the people standing at the open doors, too stunned to enter. Even the priest, with his sacristans and ministers for the Mass, did not enter, but remained outside to observe the marvel and enjoy the wonderful fragrance. The next day the unlit lamps hanging in the church were lighted by a fire sent from heaven. It happened again a few days later. The sacristan had put out the lamps after Mass and had left the church. In a little while he re-entered, to find them burning. Thinking he had forgotten to extinguish them, he took special care this time that not a single lamp should be left burning. Then he went out and locked the door. When he came back again after three hours, he once more found them burning. It now was clear to him that this place had passed from darkness to light.

PETER

Even when we are in great distress we can be certain that our Creator does not abandon us. These amazing miracles are proof of it.

GREGORY

Though I had planned to confine myself to the miracles of Italy, would you mind if we crossed over to Spain, then to Africa and then returned again to Italy? That will allow me to describe the full condemnation of the Arian heresy.

PETER

I will be glad to accompany you wherever you may choose to go.

GREGORY

(31) I was told by many people from Spain that King Hermangild, the son of Leuvigild, king of the Visigoths, was recently converted to the Catholic faith from Arianism through the preaching of the saintly Spanish bishop Leander, who is very dear to me because of our long-standing friendship.

With bribes and threats, Leuvigild, his Arian father, tried to make Hermangild return to heresy, but the latter replied resolutely that he would never abandon the true faith now that he recognized it. Infuriated at this, his father deposed him as king and deprived him of everything he possessed. But even these harsh measures failed to shake the young man's determination. Then he was cast into prison,

his hands and neck bound with chains. In his narrow dungeon he learned to despise his earthly realm and, instead, fostered an intense longing for his heavenly kingdom by lying on sackcloth, chained though he was, and praying to God for strength. With deepened spiritual insight, he could now view the passing glory of this world, for his chains had taught him to realize that whatever can be taken from us has no lasting value.

Then, in the dead of night before Easter Sunday, the father sent an Arian bishop to the prison in the hope that Hermangild would receive the sacrilegiously consecrated Communion from the bishop's hands and so be restored to the good graces of his father. But the young man, in his wholehearted dedication to God, rebuked the Arian bishop the moment he entered and with words of well-deserved censure repelled his heretical teaching. Although Hermangild lay physically prostrate in heavy chains, his spirit stood secure on the mountain stronghold of God.

When the bishop returned from his unsuccessful mission, King Leuvigild fell into a rage and instantly sent his men to kill Hermangild. His orders were carried out. The men entered the prison and drove an ax into Hermangild's head. In this way the fearless confessor of the faith was slain where he lay imprisoned. The murderers indeed had power to take away his physical life, but in doing so they robbed him of something he held in low esteem.

His true glory was quickly made known to all by signs from heaven. During the quiet hours of the night the singing of psalms could be heard around the body of this king and martyr—a king, in fact, because a martyr. Some even report that burning lamps appeared at night. As a result, the faithful began to show his body the veneration due the remains

of a true martyr; and rightly so. His father, an Arian and a murderer, came to regret what he had done, yet his regret did not bring him salvation. For, while he recognized the Catholic faith as the true faith, fear of his own people prevented him from accepting it. When he was lying on his deathbed, he took care to recommened his son, King Recared, who was then living in heresy, to Bishop Leander. Though he had been persecuting this bishop relentlessly, he now begged him to admonish and advise Recared and do for him what he had done for his brother Hermangild. Having made this request, he died.

Soon thereafter, King Recared gave up the heretical ways of his father to follow the example of his martyr brother. Once converted from Arianism, he strove zealously to lead the whole Visigothic race to the true faith, not allowing anyone to serve in his kingdom who by his heresy remained an enemy to God's kingdom. It is not surprising that he became a herald of the faith, for through the merits of his martyr brother he obtained help from above to lead many souls back to God's fatherly embrace.

We must realize, however, that this work could not have been accomplished if King Hermangild had not died for the truth. For, as the Scriptures tell us, 'A grain of wheat must fall into the ground and die, or else it remains nothing more than a grain of wheat; but if it dies, then it yields rich fruit.'[18] This truth, we know, was fulfilled in Christ, our Head, and we continue to see it fulfilled in His members. In the case of the Visigoths, one died that many might have life. One grain died as a faithful witness, and an abundant harvest of souls sprang up to embrace the true faith.

18 John 12.24.

PETER

What astounding miracles for our times!

GREGORY

(32) In the days of Emperor Justinian a persecution of Catholics broke out in Africa. It was started by the Arian Vandals and carried out with relentless cruelty. Several bishops who bravely continued to defend the truth were brought to trial, and every means was employed to make Arians of them. When words and gifts failed, the Vandal king though that torture might break their spirits. First, he commanded them to keep silent on matters of faith. When he found them continuing their attacks on the Arian heresy, for they saw that silence might be interpreted as approval, he became furious and had their tongues cut out. The incident is known to many of our elders. The marvel of it all was that, even after this brutal treatment, they continued to speak in defense of the truth as naturally as if they still had their tongues.

PETER

We stand in awe and wonder before these great miracles.

GREGORY

In speaking of the Son of God the Scriptures say, 'At the beginning of time the Word already was, and God had the Word abiding with him and the Word was God.' This is followed by a comment on His power, 'It was through him

that all things came into being.'[19] Why, then, are we surprised if the Word which created the tongue can produce speech without a tongue?

PETER

I am pleased with your explanation.

GREGORY

These men, therefore, fled to Constantinople at the time as refugees from Africa. While I was at the emperor's court as an official representative of the Church, I met an elderly bishop who claimed to have heard these tongueless mouths speaking and even shouting, 'Look, we have no tongues and still we speak clearly.' Those who looked carefully saw that they were speaking the truth. Their tongues had been cut out, leaving a deep cavity in their throats. Even though they had no organ of speech, their words were well formed and clear. One of their number, however, lost this miraculous gift because of his sins of impurity. This judgment of almighty God was most just, for one who does not preserve continence of the flesh cannot expect to have the power of speech without a tongue of flesh.

We have now said enough in condemnation of the Arian heresy and we shall return to the miracles recently performed in Italy.

(33) Eleutherius, whom I mentioned previously, abbot of the Monastery of St. Mark the Evangelist adjoining the walls of Spoleto, lived with me for a long time in my monastery at Rome and died there. His disciples say that he raised a dead person to life by the power of his prayer. He was well

19 John 1.1,3.

known for his simplicity and compunction of heart, and undoubtedly through his tears this humble, childlike soul obtained many favors from almighty God.

I will tell you about a miracle of his which I had him describe to me in his own simple words. Once while he was traveling, evening came on before he could find a lodging for the night, so he stopped at a convent. There was a little boy in this convent who was troubled every night by an evil spirit. So, after welcoming the man of God to their convent, the nuns asked him to keep the boy with him that night. He agreed, and allowed the boy to rest near him. In the morning the nuns asked him with deep concern whether he had done anything for the boy. Rather surprised that they should ask, he said, 'No.' Then they acquainted him with the boy's condition, informing him that not a night passed without the evil spirit troubling the boy. Would Eleutherius please take him along to the monastery because they could no longer bear to see him suffer. The man of God agreed to do so.

The boy remained a long time in the monastery without being troubled in the least. Highly pleased at this, the old abbot allowed his joy at the boy's healthy condition to exceed moderation. 'Brothers,' he said to his monks, 'the Devil had his joke with the sisters, but, once he encountered real servants of God, he no longer dared to come near this boy.' That very instant, hardly waiting for Eleutherius to finish speaking, the Devil again took possession of the young boy, tormenting him in the presence of all. The sight of it filled the old man's heart with grief, and when his monks tried to console him he said, 'Upon my word! Not one of you shall taste bread today until this boy is snatched out of the Devil's power.'

He prostrated himself in prayer with all his monks and continued praying until the boy was freed from the power

of the evil spirit. The cure was complete and the Devil did not dare molest him any further.

PETER

I suppose it was because he gave way to pride that God wanted this miracle to be performed with the help of the other monks.

GREGORY

That is right. Eleutherius was unable to do it by himself. Only by sharing the burden with his monks could he succeed in working this miracle.

A personal experience taught me the extent of his power in prayer. Once while I was still living in the monastery, I was seriously ill with sharp, throbbing pains in my intestines. I felt that death was approaching in a matter of hours because of the frequent spasms of intense pain. Doctors call the disease by a Greek name, syncope. If my fellow monks had not refreshed me at frequent intervals with food, my life would have ebbed away completely. Easter Sunday was upon us, and when I could not fast on Holy Saturday, a day on which even young children fast, I felt worse, more through grief than through sickness. But in my sorrow I quickly found a solution. I quietly took the man of God with me into chapel and begged him to ask almighty God to grant me the strength to fast. He agreed. As soon as we entered the chapel, he prayed for me as I had humbly requested. After a short, sincere and tearful prayer, he again left the chapel. But just as I heard him say the blessing at the conclusion of his prayer, strength returned to my weakened body, and my mind was relieved of all worry over food or sickness. In amazement I

compared the way I now felt with my previous state of health. Even when I thought of my illness I did not recognize in my body any of the pains I remembered having. And when my thoughts were occupied with the care of the monastery I was entirely unaware of my infirmity. And when I did become aware of it again, I wondered whether I had not eaten, for I felt very strong. Toward evening, I found myself so vigorous I could have prolonged my fast to the next day, had I wished to. In this incident I find a personal assurance that Eleutherius' other deeds were also true, though I was not present to witness them.

PETER

You called him a man of unusual compunction. What, then, is the power of tears? I should like to know more about this subject. And would you also explain the various kinds of compunction.

GREGORY

(34) There are many types of compunction, because every kind of fault causes regret in a repentant soul. For this reason, Jeremias, speaking in the name of contrite sinners, says, 'My eye has run down with streams of water.'[20] There are two main types of compunction, however. The penitent thirsting for God feels the compunction of fear at first; later on, he experiences the compunction of love. When he considers his sins he is overcome with weeping because he fears eternal punishment. Then when this fear subsides through prolonged sorrow and penance, a feeling of security emerges from an assurance of forgiveness, and the soul begins to burn with

20 Lam. 3.48.

a love for heavenly joys. Now the same person, who wept out of fear of punishment, sheds abundant tears because his entrance into the kingdom of heaven is being delayed. Once we envision the choirs of angels, and fix our gaze on the company of the saints and the majesty of an endless vision of God, the thought of having no part in these joys makes us weep more bitterly than the fear of hell and the prospect of eternal misery did before. Thus the compunction of fear, when perfect, leads the soul to the compunction of love.

This is beautifully symbolized in one of the historical books of the Bible. There we read that Achsa, the daughter of Caleb, sighed as she sat on her beast of burden. 'And Caleb asked her. "What is troubling you?" She answered, "Give me an additional gift! Since you have assigned to me land in the Negeb, give me also pools of water." So he gave her the upper and the lower pools.'[21]

We say that Achsa sat on an ass because her soul presided over the irrational movements of her flesh. Just as she begged her father with a sigh for pools of water, so must we with deep groans obtain from our Creator the grace of tears. There are some who have received the gift of speaking out openly for justice, of defending the oppressed, of sharing their possessions with the needy, of professing their faith ardently, who still do not have the grace of tears. These we may say received 'land in the Negeb,' that is, 'southern and dry land,' but are completely lacking in 'pools of water.' It is of utmost importance, however, that those who are zealous for good works and devote much time to performing them should also weep over their past sins, either through fear of eternal punishment or through longing for God's kingdom.

Caleb gave Achsa the upper and lower pools. These cor-

21 Josue 15.18,19.

respond to the two kinds of compunction. The soul receives the upper pools when it weeps because of its longing for heaven; it receives the lower pools when the fear of hell causes it to break forth in tears. Actually, the lower pools are given first; then, only, the upper. Yet, since the compunction of love is greater in dignity, the upper pools were necessarily mentioned first and then the lower.

PETER

A satisfying explanation. Now that you have told us about the virtuous life and miracles of the saintly Eleutherius, I should like to ask whether one can expect to find other saints of the same stature in the world today.

GREGORY

(35) Floridus, Bishop of Ferentino, was a man devoted to truth and holiness, as you well know. It was from him that I heard about Amantius, one of his priests, a man outstanding for his simplicity and endowed with the power of working miracles. Following the example of the Apostles, he would lay his hands on the sick and restore them to health. Even the severest sickness disappeared at the touch of his hand. Another miraculous power, too, is ascribed to him. Whenever he came upon serpents, he killed them with the sign of the cross, no matter where he found them or how vicious they were. For by the power of the cross which Amantius traced over them with his hand, the snakes would burst open and die immediately. Sometimes they tried to escape by crawling into their holes, but when the man of

God made the sign of the cross over the entrance to their hiding places, the serpents could be dragged out dead.

I expressed my wish to know the man with these remarkable powers and after he was introduced to me I invited him to spend a few days in one of our hospitals. If he had the grace of healing, it could quickly be verified there.

Among the patients there was one who had lost his mind, a phrenetic, to use the Greek medical term. One night this poor man shouted crazily at the top of his voice, disturbing all the other patients with his clamor and keeping them awake all night. The sad consequences was that because of this one individual all the other patients grew worse.

I heard the complete details of the story later, first from the saintly Bishop Floridus, who had remained with the priest Amantius at this home for the sick, and later from the young man who was in charge of the patients that night. According to them, Amantius got up during the night and, going quietly to the bed of the mental patient, imposed his hands on him in prayer. The sick man's condition improved immediately. So Amantius led him to the chapel in an upper story of the building where he could pray for him without being disturbed. In a short time the phrenetic returned to his bed completely cured. After that he no longer disturbed the others with his shouting, nor aggravated their condition, for he had gained perfect control of all his mental faculties. From this one miracle we learned to put our faith in everything we heard about Amantius.

PETER

It is very edifying to see men working such miracles, for we gain a glimpse of the heavenly Jerusalem in its citizens here on earth.

GREGORY

(36) I must not forget to mention the miracle with which almighty God favored His servant Maximian, now Bishop of Syracuse, but at that time abbot of my monastery in Rome. When I was at the royal court of Constantinople as papal nuncio, Maximian and his monks came to pay me a friendly visit. On the way back to Rome they encountered a terrible storm on the Adriatic. The unexplainable chain of events and the unusual miracle that followed made it clear to him and all those aboard ship that God was manifesting both His wrath and His good pleasure. The waves rose high in the fierce gale, threatening them with destruction. The mast was torn from the deck, the sails were cast into the sea, and the ship loosened in all its joints by the terrible violence of the waves dashing against its sides. Water poured in through all the broken seams and flooded the ship even to its upper deck, making it appear that the sea was in the ship instead of the ship on the sea. The passengers were terrified, for death was not just approaching, it was actually upon them. After giving each other the kiss of peace, they received the Body and Blood of our Redeemer and recommended themselves individually to God, begging Him in His goodness to receive their souls since it was He who had delivered their bodies to this dreadful death.

But almighty God, who had terrified them with a marvel of His power, amazed them with a greater marvel in saving them. Though the ship was filled with water as high as the deck, it continued to float on its course for eight days, and on the ninth day it reached the port of Cotrone. All those on board disembarked safely, Maximian being the last. As soon as he stepped off the ship, it sank to the bottom of the

harbor. Instead of removing a heavy burden, their disembarking seemed to take away the ship's bouyancy. While it carried Maximian and his monks it could carry its load of water and continue sailing. Without these passengers it lost that power. By this God wished to teach us that He sustained the ship with His own hand, for, once the men were removed from it, it could no longer float.

(37) About forty days ago, when I was visited by the saintly priest Sanctulus, whom I mentioned previously, you had an opportunity of seeing him. In fact, he comes every year from Norcia to spend a few days with me. Three days ago a monk from Norcia came with the sad news that Sanctulus had died. Although I cannot recall the charming character of this man without some pangs of grief, it will be a pleasure for me to describe his virtues as they were made known to me by priests of his neighborhood, all of them men of simplicity and genuine honesty. It is natural that between friends the familiarity springing from mutual affection should give rise to greater boldness. Sanctulus, too, urged on by his own graciousness, disclosed to me a few of the miracles he had performed.

Once when the Lombards were working their olive presses during the olive harvest, Sanctulus came to them with an empty skin to get some oil. He was a man of pleasant disposition and cheerful countenance, and, after greeting them in his friendly and jovial way, he set out the empty skin and ordered them to fill it, without bothering to ask for the oil. Now, the pagans had worked all day long without success, for, try as they would, they could press no oil from the olives. And so they were annoyed at Sanctulus' words and started to shout abuse at him. Yet his smiling cheerfulness was in no way changed, and he spoke to them again. 'Is

this your prayer for me?' he asked. 'Come, fill this skin up for Sanctulus and he will leave you.'

Seeing that no oil was coming from the press, and that the man of God still insisted, the Lombards became furious and heaped fresh abuse and insults on him. Sanctulus, too, noticed that there was not even a trickle of oil. So he asked for a bucket of water, blessed it, and with all eyes fixed on him, poured it into the press. After this blessing, the oil began to pour out in great abundance. The Lombards, who had worked in vain before, now had enough oil to fill their own containers as well as that of Sanctulus. Their hearts were filled with gratitude because the holy man who had come to them begging for oil was now, through his blessing, supplying in great abundance what he himself had come to find.

At another time the people were suffering severely from famine. The Church of St. Lawrence the Martyr had been burned down by the Lombards, and, since the man of God wished to restore it, he hired a great number of craftsmen and other workers. All these had to be supplied with rations every day, and there was no putting it off. But because of the famine there was no bread. The workmen, in need of strength to continue their work, clamored for food. Hearing of this, the man of God went out to console them with a promise to take care of their needs, all the while feeling deep anxiety, for he had no way of supplying the bread he had promised. As he was going from one place to another, he came upon an oven in which the women of the neighborhood had baked bread the day before. Bending down, he looked to see whether any bread was left there. To his surprise he found a huge loaf of bread, unusually white. He took it out, but would not give it to the workers, fearing that, if it belonged to someone else, he would be doing wrong in trying

to be charitable. To assure himself that it did not belong to one of the women, he went to all the neighboring houses and showed it to each one of them. Without exception, they assured him that it did not belong to them, for each had taken her full number of loaves from the oven.

Happy with this information, the man of God brought the loaf back to the workmen, asking them to thank God for miraculously supplying them with bread. With this, he invited them to eat of the bread he was setting before them. When they had all taken their fill, the fragments were gathered up. They amounted to more than the original loaf. The next day these fragments were served to the workers, and again the leftovers were gathered. Once more it was found that these were more abundant than those originally served. For ten days all the craftsmen and other workers were fed from this one loaf of bread. Though they ate of it every day, there was always enough left for the next day. It was as if at each meal the food multiplied and the fragments of bread increased in number by being eaten. Each meal thus seemed to be a multiplication of bread.

PETER

A tremendous miracle and a remarkable imitation of our Lord's example.

GREGORY

In this case, Peter, it was through His servant that Christ fed a large crowd with one loaf of bread. He himself had personally satisfied 5,000 men with five loaves. He continues even today to multiply a few kernels of grain into a bountiful harvest. And He who makes the seed spring up from the

ground is the same One who created everything out of nothing.

But to keep you from spending too much time admiring the external miracles Sanctulus performed through God's power, I should like you to see how great that same power made him interiorly.

One day, toward evening, as the Lombards were planning to kill a deacon whom they held prisoner, the man of God, Sanctulus, came to them, pleading for the deacon's life and freedom. His request received no consideration whatever. Seeing that they were making final plans for the deacon's death, Sanctulus asked that he be given into his custody. Their answer came promptly. 'We shall do as you ask,' they said, 'but on this condition, that, if he escapes, you shall die in his place.' The man of God gladly accepted this condition and took the responsibilty of guarding the deacon.

At midnight, while all the Lombards were sound asleep, he woke the deacon. 'Rise quickly,' he said, 'and flee. Almighty God grants you your freedom!' The deacon, remembering the promise made, answered, 'I cannot run away, Father, for, if I escape, you will surely die.' But Sanctulus urged him on. 'Rise and go!' he said. 'May God deliver you out of all danger. I am in His hands. They can do to me only what He allows.'

So the deacon made his escape and Sanctulus remained behind like a surety betrayed. In the morning the Lombards came to get the deacon whom they had entrusted to the man of God. When they were told that he had escaped, they said, 'You know very well what the agreement was.' 'I do,' answered Sanctulus undisturbed. 'You are a good man,' they continued, 'and we do not like to see you die a painful death. Choose the manner of death you prefer.' To this the man of

God said, 'I am in the hands of God. Kill me in whatever way God shall allow you to kill me.' The Lombards decided unanimously to behead him, for in this way he would end his life quickly without much pain.

Once it became known that Sanctulus was to die, all the Lombards of that district gathered together, for he was held in high honor by them for his sanctity. But, as they are a cruel people, they came together in throngs, happy at the prospect of witnessing an execution. The man of God was led forth. Then from among all their strong men one was chosen who would be the surest to sever the head from the body with a single stroke.

The holy man, surrounded by armed soldiers, resorted at once to his own weapons by asking that he be granted a few moments for prayer. The request was granted, and Sanctulus fell prostrate in prayer. After he had been praying for some time, the barbarian chosen to be his executioner pushed him with the tip of his boot, signaling him to rise. 'Get up,' he said. 'Now kneel down and hold out your neck.' The man of God did as he was told. When he saw the sword drawn from its scabbard, he is said to have exclaimed, 'St. John, take hold of it!' The executioner raised the sword high for a mighty stroke, but he could not bring it down, for suddenly his arm stiffened and the sword remained where it was, raised aloft to the sky.

The entire gathering of Lombards changed its mood. All had come to witness the execution of Sanctulus, but now, in their admiration for him, they began to sing his praises. They held him in respect, for it was clear in their minds that one who could stay the sword of the executioner in mid-air must be a man of extraordinary sanctity. They asked him to get up, and he rose. Then they asked him to heal the executioner's

arm. He refused, saying, 'I will not pray for him unless he first takes an oath not to kill another Christian with that arm.' The Lombard, who had obviously lost the use of his arm as a punishment for raising it against God, had no choice but to swear never again to kill a Christian. Only then did the man of God command him to put down his arm. He did so, and was immediately ordered to put his sword back in its sheath.

Recognizing the exceptional powers of this man, all the Lombards wished to offer him presents of the cattle and sheep they had stolen. But Sanctulus refused to accept such gifts and asked instead for a worthy reward. 'If you wish to give me anything,' he said, 'give me all the prisoners you have in your power. Then I will have a good reason to pray for you.' His request was granted. All the prisoners were told to go with him to their freedom. Thus by God's gracious arrangement many were freed from death because one man had offered to give his life for the safety of another.

PETER

What a marvel of grace. Though I have heard this account from others, I admit that, every time I hear it, it sounds new.

GREGORY

In this miracle you need not marvel at any power in Sanctulus himself. But realize, if you can, what spirit it was that possessed his simple mind and raised him to those heights of virtue. Where must his soul have been when he made that firm decision to die for his neighbor, when he disregarded his own life for the life of a brother, when he held out his

neck for the sword! What strong love possessed that heart to make it face death unflinchingly for the safety of one neighbor! We know for certain that Sanctulus was not well versed in literary studies, nor did he know the precepts of the Law. But, because 'love of neighbor . . . fulfills all the demands of the law,'[22] he kept the law in its entirely by his love of God and neighbor. Knowledge that he did not receive through formal study became a living force within him through love. Sanctulus may never have read what St. John the Apostle said regarding our Redeemer, namely, that He 'proved his love to us by laying down his life for our sakes; we too must be ready to lay down our lives for the sake of our brethren.'[23] He had a practical rather than theoretical knowledge of this precept of the Apostle. Let us compare, if you will, his wise ignorance with our unwise learning; our learning lies low, whereas his wisdom rises high. We speak of virtue while we are devoid of it ourselves; we take our stand in the midst of fruit-bearing trees to enjoy their pleasant fragrance, but we do not eat of their fruit. He on the contrary, knew how to gather the fruits of virtue, though he may not have sensed the sweetness they exhaled through the written word.

PETER

Why is it, do you think, that good people are usually taken from us, and those who might be an inspiration to many by their good lives are extremely rare or cannot be found at all?

22 Rom. 13.10.
23 1 John 3.16.

GREGORY

The malice remaining in the world deserves no better than to have those who could be of profit quickly taken away. It is to spare the elect the sight of worse evils that they are removed when the end of time approaches. With this in mind the Prophet says, 'The just perishes and no man lays it to heart, and men of mercy are taken away, because there is none that understands.'[24] And in another place the Bible tells us, 'Open that they may go forth that shall tread her down: take the stones out of the way.'[25] And, according to Solomon's words, there is 'a time to scatter stones, and a time to gather them.'[26] Because the end of the world presses upon us, it is necessary to gather living stones for the heavenly building, in order to make our Jerusalem grow to its full stature. It is not our belief, however, that all the elect are taken out of this world, leaving only the perverse to continue on, for sinners would never turn to sorrow and repentance if there were no good examples to motivate them.

PETER

It is unreasonable for me to keep on complaining about the death of the good, when I see that sinners, too, die in great numbers.

GREGORY

(38) You should not be surprised at this, Peter, for you were well acquainted with Redemptus, Bishop of Ferentino,

24 Isa. 57.1.
25 Jer. 50.26.
26 Eccle. 3.5.

a saintly man who died about seven years ago. He was a cherished friend of mine while I was still in the monastery. At my request, therefore, he told me of what he had learned about the end of the world during the reign of my predecessor, John the Younger,[27] from facts that were well known far and wide. While he was making a visitation of his parishes, it happened that one day, toward, evening he came to the Church of St. Juticus the Martyr. Being tired after a strenuous day, he asked for a bed near the martyr's burial place, because he wished to rest there. At midnight, as he told me, he was lying there, unable to sleep, yet not fully awake. In this semi-conscious state, accompanied as it usually is by a mental heaviness and a sense of oppression, he suddenly beheld the blessed martyr Juticus standing before him and saying, 'Redemptus, are you awake?' He answered that he was. The vision continued, 'The end of all flesh has come!' And it repeated, 'The end of all flesh has come! The end of all flesh has come!' After this threefold warning, the vision disappeared. Rising quickly, Redemptus poured out his grief in prayers to God. Terrible signs in the heavens followed. In the north appeared the gleaming spears of an army in battle array.

It was not long after this vision that wild hordes of Lombards unleashed from their own native land descended on us. The population of Italy, which had grown vast, like a rich harvest of grain, was cut down to wither away. Cities were sacked, fortifications overthrown, churches burned, monasteries and cloisters destroyed. Farms were abandoned, and the countryside, uncultivated, became a wilderness. The land was no longer occupied by its owners, and wild beasts roamed the fields where so many people had once made their homes.

27 Pope John III.

I do not know what is happening elsewhere, but in this land of ours the world is not merely announcing its end, it is pointing directly to it. Our seeking after the things of heaven must, therefore, be all the more urgent, since we know that the things of earth are quickly slipping from our grasp. It would have been our duty to despise the world even if it had smiled on us, delighting our souls with prosperity. But now, struck as it is with countless scourges, worn out with adversity and daily lamenting its woes, what other message does it din into our ears but that we should cease loving it?

There were many other miracles that might have been included among the lives of the saints, but I leave them to silence and hurry on to other matters.

PETER

Considering how many there are within the fold of the Church who doubt the existence of the soul after death, I am urged to beg you for proofs from reason showing that the soul will continue to live on forever. And if any examples from the lives of the saints come to your mind, use them to illustrate your explanations. Such a procedure will remove doubts from the minds of many and will at the same time be a source of edification.

GREGORY

That is a very difficult task, especially for one whose mind is busy attending to many other affairs. But if some will find it profitable, I will gladly set aside my own wishes in order to help my neighbor. Therefore, with God's help, I will demonstrate in a fourth book, to the best of my ability, the truth that the soul will continue to live on after death.

BOOK FOUR

AFTER ADAM, the father of the human race, was driven from the joys of paradise as a result of sin, he entered upon the distress of this dark exile we are now suffering. Driven outside of himself by his sinful act, he was no longer able to perceive the joys of heaven which had been the object of his contemplation before. In paradise he habitually enjoyed converse with God and in purity of heart and loftiness of vision mingled with holy, angelic spirits. After falling from that noble state he also lost the inner light which enlightened his mind. Born as we are of his flesh into the darkness of this exile, we hear, of course, that there is a heavenly country, that angels are its citizens, and that the spirits of the just live in company with them; but being carnal men without any experimental knowledge of the invisible, we wonder about the existence of anything we cannot see with our bodily eyes. Adam could not possibly have entertained such doubts, for, although he was excluded from the happiness of paradise, he remembered what he had lost, because he had once known it. Carnal men, on the other hand, cannot remember or appreciate these joys when they hear about

them, because, unlike him, they have no past experience to fall back on.

Take the case of an expectant mother cast into a dungeon where she gives birth to a son. He stays there with her and grows up in the darkness. Suppose this boy's mother described to him the sun, the moon, and the stars, the mountains and fields, birds flying in the air and horses running in the fields. Born and raised in the dungeon, knowing only the perpetual darkness around him, he would doubt whether the things he heard his mother describe actually existed, since he had no experience of them. So it is with men born into the darkness of this earthly exile. They hear about lofty and invisible things, but hesitate to believe in them, because they know only the lowly, visible things of earth into which they were born. It was for this reason that the Creator of the visible and invisible worlds came as the Only-begotten of the Father to redeem the human race and to send the Holy Spirit into our hearts. From Him we were to receive new life in order to believe those truths of which we as yet had no knowledge through experience. All of us, therefore, who have received this Spirit as the pledge of our inheritance are no longer in doubt about the existence of invisible beings. On the other hand, anyone who is not yet solidly grounded in this faith ought to accept what his elders say, putting his trust in them, since they have experimental knowledge of the invisible world through the Holy Spirit. In our story, too, it would have been foolish for the little boy to think his mother was telling him lies about the light, merely because he himself knew nothing but the darkness of the dungeon.

PETER

I am very pleased with what you say. But one who does not believe in the unseen is an unbeliever pure and simple, and such a one does not look to faith in his doubts, but to reason.

GREGORY

(2) I venture to say that not even an unbeliever lives without faith, for, if I should ask him who his father and mother were, he would immediately point them out to me. And if I should ask whether he knew them at the time he was conceived or saw them at the time he was born, he would admit that he had neither known nor seen them at those times. Yet he believes firmly, for he maintains without any doubt that this man and this woman are his father and mother.

PETER

I confess that up to now I did not think an unbeliever had faith.

GREGORY

Unbelievers do have faith, but, unfortunately, not in God. If they had faith in Him, they would not be unbelievers. Hence, they must be shaken out of their unbelief and invited to accept the true faith. If in regard to their own physical existence they accept as facts events they never saw, why do they refuse to believe in an invisible world on the ground that it cannot be seen by the human eye? It is evident from reason—I mean reason joined to faith—that the soul lives on after the death of the body.

(3) Almighty God created three kinds of living spirits: one that is not clothed with flesh; another that is clothed with flesh but does not die with the flesh; and a third that is clothed with flesh and perishes with it. The spirit which is not clothed with flesh is that of the angels. The spirit clothed in flesh, but not destined to die with it, is the human spirit. The spirit that is clothed in the flesh and dies with the flesh is the spirit of all beasts and brute animals. Now, since man was created midway between angels and beasts, to be lower than the one and higher than the other, he has something in common both with the highest and with the lowest. His spirit shares immortality with the angels, and with animals he is doomed to a bodily death, until the day when a glorious resurrection will swallow up mortality and the flesh will cling once again to the spirit to be preserved by it for all eternity, even as the spirit itself is preserved in God by clinging to Him. Not even in the punishment of the reprobate does the flesh waste away to complete nothingness; it continues, rather, to waste away without ever ceasing to exist. Those, therefore, who have sinned through the spirit and the flesh will continue to live, only to experience an eternal dying in body and soul.

PETER

All that you say delights the minds of those who have the faith. But, in making your clear-cut distinction between the spirit of man and of animals, how do you explain the words of Solomon? 'I said to myself:' he writes, 'As for the children of men, it is God's way of testing them and of showing that they are in themselves like beasts. For the lot of man and of beast is one lot.' And continuing with the same thought he

says, 'The one dies as well as the other. Both have the same life-breath, and man has no advantage over the beast.' To these words he adds the general statement, 'But all is vanity. Both go to the same place; both were made from the dust, and to the dust they return.'[1]

GREGORY

(4) Solomon's book in which these words apear is called Ecclesiastes. Translated, this name means 'a preacher.' Now, in preaching one expresses sentiments that tend to quiet a noisy crowd. And when there are many people holding opinions of various kinds, they are brought into harmony by the reasoning of the speaker. This book, then, is called 'the preacher' because in it Solomon makes the feelings of the disorganized people his own in order to search into and give expression to the thoughts that come to their untutored minds perhaps by the way of temptation. For the sentiments he expresses in his search are as varied as the individuals he impersonates. But, like a true preacher, he stretches out his arms at the end of his address and calms the troubled spirits of the assembled people, calling them back to one way of thinking. This we see him do at the close of the book, where he says, 'Let us all hear together the conclusion of the discourse. Fear God and keep His commandments: for this is man's all.'[2] If he did not impersonate many individuals in his manner of speaking, why did he urge all of them to listen together to the conclusion of his discourse? When at the end of the book he says, 'Let us all hear together,' he is his own witness that he was speaking for many persons

1 Eccle. 3.18-20.
2 Eccle. 12.13 (Douay).

and not for himself alone. Therefore, we find that some statements of this book are introduced as inquires, while others are meant to give satisfaction by their logic. In some, he reproduces the thoughts of one tempted and still given over to the pleasures of this life; in others, he discusses matters that pertain to reason and tries to restrain the soul from pleasure. Accordingly, he says, 'Here is what I recognize as good: it is well for a man to eat and drink and enjoy all the fruits of his labor.' Somewhat later he adds, 'It is better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasting.'[3] If it is good to eat and drink, it would seem better to go to the house of feasting than to the house of mourning.

It is clear from these passages that one statement is introduced through his impersonation of the weak, while the other is added from the dictates of reason, for he immediately discusses the dictates of reason and shows the advantage of a house of mourning. 'For that is the end of every man,' he says, 'and the living should take it to heart.' And again he writes, 'Rejoice, O young man, while you are young.' While a little later he adds, 'The dawn of youth is fleeting.'[4] In criticizing what he has just recommended, he indicates clearly that the former pronouncement proceeded from carnal desires, while the latter was based on a true judgment.

First, in describing the pleasures of the flesh, he puts all cares out of his mind and states that it is good to eat and drink. Later, he finds fault with this view from the standpoint of reason, and says it is better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasting. Likewise, from purely carnal considerations he advises a young man to find his pleasure in his youth, and later, modifying this statement, he blames

3 Eccle. 5.17; 7.2.
4 Eccle. 7.2; 11.9,10.

youth and its pleasures as fleeting. So, too, when he speaks from the minds of the infirm, our preacher voices an opinion based on suspicion. 'For the lot of man and of beast,' he says, 'is one lot; the one dies as well as the other. Both have the same life-breath, and man has no advantage over the beast.'[5] Later, however, he presents conclusions drawn from reason and says, 'What has the wise man more than the fool? and what the poor man, but to go where there is life?'[6] So, after he says, 'Man has no advantage over the beast,' he again specifies that the wise man has an advantage not only over the beast, but also over the foolish man, namely, his ability to go 'where there is life.' With these words he points out, first of all, that man's true life is not found here on earth, for he claims that it is found elsewhere. This, then, is the great advantage man has over the animal: The animal does not live on after death, while man begins to live only when he has completed this visible life through bodily death.

Farther on in the Book of Ecclesiastes he also says, 'Anything you can turn your hand to, do with what power you have; for there will be no work, nor reason, nor knowledge, nor wisdom in the nether world where you are going.'[7] How then can the lot of man and of beast be one, and the condition of both be equal? How can it be true that man has nothing more than the beast, when the beast does not live on after death, while the spirit of man, if it has done evil, is led to hell after death and continues to live even in death? It is evident, then, that in both of these opposing statements the preacher is truthful: in one, he gives expression to man's temptation; in the other, he defines a spiritual truth.

5 Eccle. 3.19.
6 Eccle. 6.8 (Douay).
7 Eccle. 9.10.

PETER

I am happy that I was ignorant on this point and proposed the question, for it provided an excellent opportunity for me to gain a thorough understanding. And now I beg you to bear patiently with me if I, too, like Ecclesiastes, impersonate the weak and continue the inquiry in their name in order to help them more directly.

GREGORY

Why should I be annoyed if you stoop to help a weak brother? Does not St. Paul say, 'I have been everything by turns to everybody, to bring everybody salvation'?[8] In doing this out of charity, you deserve greater respect, because you are thereby imitating the practice of an outstanding preacher.

PETER

(5) I once witnessed the sudden death of a monk. At one moment he was speaking to me and the next moment I saw him dead. But I did not see whether or not his soul departed. And I find it difficult to accept on faith what I cannot see.

GREGORY

Why should one be surprised, Peter, at not seeing the soul depart, when it is invisible even while it is in the body? Surely you do not think that I am without a soul just because you cannot see it while you are speaking with me? The soul is

8 1 Cor. 9.22.

invisible by nature and remains invisible whether it is in the body or departing from it.

PETER

But the life of the soul during its stay in the body can be observed from the movements of the body, because the body cannot move unless the soul is present. But in what movements or in what activities can I recognize the life of the soul after death? From what tangible signs can I learn of the existence of the invisible?

GREGORY

What I am going to say here of the power of the soul and the power of God is to be understood by way of contrast, not of comparison. The power of the soul makes the body live and move. So, also, God's power fills all His creatures. He gives life to some with His own breath; to others He gives animate or merely inanimate existence. Surely you believe that there is a God, the Creator and Ruler, unbounded and invisible, who fills and embraces all things, transcending and upholding them. You ought, then, also, to realize that this invisible God has invisible servants, for is it not proper that those who serve ought to bear a resemblance to the one they serve? The servants of the invisible God must, therefore, be invisible themselves. And who are these invisible servants, if not the angels and the souls of the just?

In considering the movements of the body, it is from its lowest activity that we infer the soul's presence in the body. In like manner, when we judge the soul's continued existence after it leaves the body, we ought to draw our conclusions

from its highest activity. Now, the soul must be able to live invisibly, because it is to remain in the service of God.

PETER

That is all very true. But the mind rebels at believing what it cannot see with bodily eyes.

GREGORY

St. Paul says that faith 'is that which gives substance to our hopes, which convinces us of things we cannot see.'[9] According to him, that which cannot be seen is truly said to be taken on faith, for an object that can be seen is no longer an object of faith. But to bring you back to yourself in a few words—no visible objects are seen except through invisible powers. Everything the eye of your body looks upon is corporeal, yet that very physical eye would not see anything corporeal unless something incorporeal gave it those keen powers of vision. Take away the unseen mind, and the eye that used to see stares emptily into space. Take the soul from the body; let the eyes remain wide open. Now, if the eyes were able to see by their own power, why is it that they see nothing when the soul withdraws? The obvious conclusion is that visible things are seen only because of an invisible power.

Imagine a house under construction, and visualize the lifting of immense weights, and large columns suspended from mighty cranes. Tell me, who is doing this work? Is it the visible body that pulls those massive materials with its hands, or is it the invisible soul that activates the body? For,

9 Heb. 11.1.

if you take away the power invisibly present in the body, very soon all that visible mass of materials, which you saw moving, comes to a standstill. From such observations we begin to realize that in this visible world, too, nothing can be achieved except through invisible forces. Almighty God, then, with His breath and immanent power imparts life and movement to invisible, rational beings, which in their turn give movement and sensation to visible bodies of flesh and blood.

PETER

I gladly admit defeat in the face of your arguments, which compel me to consider this visible world relatively insignificant, though, while I was speaking in the person of a weaker member, I questioned the importance of the invisible world. I heartily accept everything you say. Yet, since the physical movements of the body show that a living soul is present, I should also like to have some clear objective evidence for the continued existence of the soul after it leaves the body.

GREGORY

(6) If I find your heart prepared, producing the evidence will be no trouble at all. Would the holy Apostles and martyrs of Christ have despised the present life and accepted physical death in its stead, if they had not realized that true life awaits their souls hereafter? You acknowledge that the life of the soul in the body is recognized from the physical movements of the body. Now consider those who laid down their lives willingly because of their faith in a life hereafter, and see how renowned they have become through their miracles. The sick approach the lifeless remains of these martyrs and

are healed; perjurers come and find themselves tormented by Satan; the possessed come and are delivered from the power of the Devil; lepers approach and are cleansed; the dead are brought and are restored to life. Consider what a fullness of life they must enjoy where they now live, if even their dead bodies here on earth are alive with such miraculous powers. So, if you accept the presence of a soul in the body because of the body's physical activities, why do you not also recognize the continued life of the soul after death from the miracles performed through its lifeless body?

PETER

In my opinion, no objections can be brought against these arguments of yours which compel us to believe in the invisible world with evidence taken from the visible.

GREGORY

(7) A little while ago, you complained that you did not see the soul of a certain person as it departed from the body. It was a mistake on your part even to try to see an invisible being with your bodily eyes. For it was with spiritual vision, purified by acts of faith and abundant prayers, that many of our people were able repeatedly to observe souls leaving the body. I see a real need, therefore, of telling you how souls were observed at their departure from this world, and, also, how much the souls themselves could see on leaving the body. The examples given will, I hope, free your mind from all those disturbing doubts which reason alone evidently could not clear away.

(8) In the second book of these Dialogues I related what I had heard from the disciples of the saintly Benedict. Though

he was a long distance from Capua, he watched the soul of Germanus, Bishop of Capua, being carried by angels up to heaven in a ball of fire in the dead of night. As he gazed at the soul rising to heaven, all the powers of his mind unfolded, and he saw the whole world gathered up before his eyes in what appeared to be a single ray of light.

(9) These same disciples informed me that there were two noblemen, the brothers Speciosus and Gregory, both well trained in the various branches of secular learning, who had entered the monastery to submit themselves to the guidance of Benedict's rule. The man of God received them as monks for the monastery which he had founded near Terracina. The two brothers had been very wealthy, but had distributed all their wealth to the poor as a ransom for their souls, and remained as monks in this monastery.

Once, Speciosus was sent to Capua on business for the monastery. Then one day, his brother Gregory, while seated at table with the community, was raised to a state of ecstasy and saw the soul of his brother, many miles away, departing from this world. Informing the brethren of what had happened, he hurried off to Capua, only to find his brother already buried. Upon inquiry he learned that Speciosus had died at the very hour when he had seen his soul departing.

(10) While I was still in the monastery I was told the following incident by a very devout religious. The passengers on a boat heading from Sicily to Rome saw the soul of one of God's recluses of Samnium making its way to heaven. They were still far out at sea at the time. So, on landing, they made inquiries and found out that the servant of God had died the very day they saw his soul going to heaven.

(11) It was also at this time that another holy man told me the story of the revered Abbot Spes, who built a monas-

tery in a place called Campli, about six miles from the old city of Norcia. Almighty God in His mercy saved this man from the eternal torments of hell by treating him with the utmost severity and at the same time favoring him with unusual graces. By freeing the abbot of a scourge with which He had been afflicting him, God showed how truly He had loved him even while chastising him.

For forty years he suffered total blindness, unreleived by the faintest light of vision. Now, one cannot endure so severe a chastisement if God's grace is withdrawn, or if the same merciful Father who inflicts the suffering does not also supply the strenght to bear it. Otherwise, through our impatience, the punishment for sin only makes us greater sinners, and the lamentable outcome is that the remedy which gave fair promise of ending our sins only multiplies them. But God sees our weakness and, in applying His sanctions, mingles severity with a father's watchful concern over our well-being. In chastising His elect He shows a merciful justice in order always to have some to whom He can be justly merciful. For this reason He never allowed the old man to be destitute of interior illumination while He afflicted him with external darkness. Although fatigued with the scourge of this bodily hardship, the man of God always enjoyed an inner consolation, sheltered as he was by the power of the Holy Spirit. Forty years he spent in blindness, and then God restored light to his eyes, informing him at the same time that the day of his death was near. Besides this, He also urged him to preach the word of life to the monasteries of the surrounding territory, for, now that the light was restored to his body, it was only proper that he should visit his brother monks and explain to them the light that burns in the heart.

He complied without delay, and on his visits to the neigh-

boring monasteries preached the life-giving principles he had learned through his own experience. He returned to his monastery after fifteen days of preaching and there, surrounded by his monks, he received the sacrament of the Lord's Body and Blood. Then all began the sacred chant of the psalms, and while the others continued with the psalmody, the man of God became fixed in prayer and so died. All present saw the abbot's soul escape from his body in the form of a dove. It rose upward through the open roof of the chapel and sped away from their sight until it disappeared in the heavens. I believe that the soul took the form of a dove because God wished to indicate by this symbol the simplicity of heart in which this man had served Him.

(12) I must not forget to mention the story told me by Abbot Stephen, whom you know very well. He died in Rome not long ago. According to him, there was a priest in the province of Norcia who ruled the church entrusted to his care in the fear of the Lord. From the moment of his ordination to the priesthood, he loved his wife as a brother loves his sister, but he avoided her as he would an enemy, never allowing her to come near him nor permitting himself any opportunity of going near her. In this way he cut off all possible occasion of familiarity with her. It is characteristic of holy men always to keep their distance from what is unlawful, and in doing so they usually deny themselves even what is lawful. This priest, then, in order not to incur any guilt through her, refused to have her render him even the necessary services.

After a long life, forty years of which he spent in the priestly ministry, he was seized with a severe fever and brought to the point of death. When his wife saw him lying there half-dead, with all the strength of his body wasted away,

she put her ear to his face trying to catch the least sound of breathing.

Conscious of her presence, he mustered all his strength and with the little breath that was still in him he rasped in a hoarse whisper, 'Go away from me, woman. The fire is still flickering. Take away the tinder.'

As she stepped back, strength seemed to return to him, and in an outburst of joy he exclaimed, 'It is good that you come, my lords! It is good! But why do you take the trouble to visit a worthless servant? I come! I come! I am most grateful to you!'

Since he kept repeating these words, his friends standing at his side tried to find out to whom he was speaking. Surprised at their question, the sick man answered, 'Do you not see the holy Apostles present here? Do you not see the princes of the Apostles, Peter and Paul?' Then turning again to his vision he said, 'I come, I come.' And with these words he breathed his last. By following the Apostles he bore witness to the fact that he had seen them.

It often happens that the saints of heaven appear to the just at the hour of death in order to reassure them. And, with the vision of the heavenly company before their minds, they die without experiencing any fear or agony.

(13) On this subject I must tell you what I heard from the servant of God, Probus, who now presides over the monastery of St. Renatus here at Rome. He used to tell me of his uncle, Bishop Probus of Rieti, who was overtaken by a servere illness toward the end of his life. His father Maximus, in an attempt to find a cure for him, sent his servants out to the neighboring districts to summon doctors. They came and gathered round the bed of the sick bishop. After taking his pulse, they concluded that death was im-

minent. Since it was growing late and was nearly time for the evening meal, the bishop felt concern for the doctors. In fact, he was more solicitous for their welfare than for his own. So he had them accompany his aged father to the upper story of the episcopal residence to refresh themselves after their labor.

They did so, leaving only one little boy behind with the bishop. This lad, Probus tells me, is still alive. While he was watching at the bedside of the sick bishop, he suddenly saw some men in white robes approaching. The brilliance of their countenance far surpassed the splendor of their garments. Dazzled by the brightness of the vision, the boy began to ask in a loud, excited voice who these men were. Awakened by his voice the bishop, too, looked up to see the visitors and, recognizing immediately who they were, tried to calm the boy, who by this time was sobbing and shaking with fear. 'Don'ts be afraid, my boy,' he said. 'The two martyrs, St. Juvenal and St. Eleutherius, are paying me a visit.'

But the boy ran from the room as fast as he could, overcome with terror at the unusual sight, and told his father and the doctors what he had seen. They came down at once to see for themselves and found the bishop already dead. The holy martyrs, at whose sight the boy had been so frightened, had taken his soul with them.

(14) Another story not to be passed over was told me by serious-minded and saintly people. In the time of the Goths a noble girl by the name of Galla, daughter of the consul and patrician Symmachus, was married at a very early age and a year later was widowed by the loss of her husband. Her age and wealth invited her to a second marriage in a world glowing with opportunity, but she preferred a spiritual marriage with the Lord. Marriages of this kind usually begin

with sorrow and suffering, but in the end lead to the eternal joys of heaven, whereas an earthly marriage always begins with joy but ends in sorrow. This young widow had a very passionate nature, however, and was told by her doctors that, if she did not marry again, she would grow a beard even though she was a woman. And that is what happened. But the saintly woman was not disturbed by this external disfigurement. She loved the beauty of her mystical spouse, and was not worried over this physical blemish, since her body was not the object of her heavenly spouse's love. Thus, shortly after her husband's death, she laid aside her secular garb and dedicated herself to the service of God in the convent at the Church of St. Peter the Apostle. For many years she lived there in simplicity of heart, giving herself to tireless prayer and generous works of charity.

When God decreed to grant her an eternal reward for her labors, she was afflicted with cancer of the breast. It was her practice to keep two candles burning at the foot of her bed at night, because she hated darkness, being a friend of light, physical as well as spiritual light. One night, as she lay in bed worn out by her affliction, she saw the Apostle Peter standing between the two candlesticks near her bed. Without the least sign of fear, and encouraged by her love, she spoke to him with great joy. 'What is it, my lord?' she said. 'Have my sins been forgiven?' With a most pleasant expression on his face, St. Peter nodded in affirmation. 'They are forgiven,' he said. 'Come.' But because of her very great love for one of the nuns of the convent, Galla added immediately, 'I beg you to let Sister Benedicta come with me.' He was unwilling to grant this request, but allowed another sister to accompany her. 'Sister Benedicta,' he explained, 'will follow you in thirty days.'

This ended their conversation and St. Peter vanished. Galla at once sent for the mother of the community and told her everything she had seen and heard. On the third day, Galla died and also the sister who had been mentioned by St. Peter. And the sister for whom Galla had especially asked followed in thirty days. This event is still one of the memorable events of that convent. The younger sisters now in the community, who heard the story from the older ones, can tell it in all its details exactly as if they themselves had witnessed the miracle.

(15) In this connection we should also know that frequently the sound of heavenly singing accompanies the death of the elect, and, while they listen to it with great delight, they are preserved from feeling pain at the separation of soul and body. I remember touching on this subject before, in my homilies on the Gospels,[10] where I spoke of a man named Servulus. I am sure you remember seeing this holy man in the portico which one passes on the way to the Church of St. Clement. He was poor in possessions but rich in merit. A long sickness had disabled him and, as far back as I can remember, he suffered from a severe paralysis which stayed with him till his death. To say that he could not stand on his feet does not describe his condition, for he could not raise himself in bed even to a sitting position, nor could he put his hand to his face, or turn his body from one side to the other. His mother and brother were there to help him, and whatever he received in the form of alms he asked them to distribute to the poor. He did not know how to read or write; still, he bought himself the sacred books of Scripture and had them read to him regularly by religious persons whom he used to invite to his home as guests. Thus in his own

10 *Hom. in Evang.* 1.15.5 (*PL* 76.1133).

way he acquired a knowledge of the whole of Scripture, although, as I said, he was quite illiterate. In his sufferings he applied himself day and night to prayers of thanksgiving and hymns of praise.

When the time came to receive the reward for his patience, the pain in his limbs centered on his vital organs. Realizing that death was near, he asked the strangers and guests to stand and recite with him the psalms for the dying. While he was chanting the psalms with them, awaiting death, he suddenly interrupted their prayer with a frightened cry. 'Listen,' he said. 'Do you not hear the beautiful hymns resounding in heaven?' As he turned his mind to follow the melodies resounding within him, his soul was freed from the body. At its departure a fragrant odor spread through the room, giving all a sense of indescribable delight. They were now assured that the choirs of heaven had received him into their company. A monk of our monastery who witnessed these events cannot refrain from weeping whenever he describes how this fragrant odor remained with them until the body was buried.

(16) I recall that in the same homilies I mentioned an event to which Speciosus, a fellow priest of mine acquainted with the facts, bear me witness.[11] At the time of my entrance into the monastery, an aged woman named Redempta, who had assumed the garb of a religious, lived here in Rome near the Church of Blessed Mary Ever Virgin. She was a disciple of Herundo, a famous recluse, well known for her great miracles, who is said to have lived as a recluse in mountains of Praeneste. Redempta had two disciples living with her who wore the same kind of religious garb. One was called Romula and the name of the other, who still survives,

11 *Ibid.* 2.40.11 (*PL* 76.1310-12).

I do not know, though I recognize her by sight. These three lived together in the same home, leading a life rich in virtue but very poor in earthly possessions. Romula surpassed her fellow sister in merit and virtue. She was a person of remarkable patience and obedience. Guarding her tongue in silence, she strove earnestly to live in a state of uninterrupted prayer. Now it often happens that some are considered perfect saints in the eyes of men, while in the sight of their Creator they are still marred by imperfections. Similarly, an unfinished statue might be praised as a perfect masterpiece by a person without proper training. But the artist, even after hearing his work praised, would still continue working with chisel and hammer until the statue was perfect in every detail. The case of Romula was similar. God allowed her to be afflicted with paralysis, a physical malady which confined her to bed for many years, depriving her almost entirely of the use of her limbs. This affliction did not cause her to lose patience, however. In fact, the physical disability was an occasion for her to grow in virtue. She became all the more zealous in the practice of prayer since she was unable to do anything else.

One night she called for the gentle Redempta, who treated her disciples as her own daughters. 'Mother,' she said, 'come, please come to me.' Redempta answered her call instantly and arrived with her other disciple. This scene, just as it was described by the two nuns, became known to many, and I, too, learned about it at the time. While they stood around Romula's bed at midnight, a light suddenly shown down from heaven, flooding the entire room. Its splendor and brilliance struck fear and dread into their hearts. Their bodies became rigid and remained fixed as if paralyzed. Then they heard the sound of an immense throng. The door of the room

was thrown wide open as if a great number of persons were pushing their way in. Those who stood round the bed had the impression that the room was being crowed with people, but because of their excessive fear and the extreme brightness they were unable to see. Fear paralyzed them and the brilliant light dazzled their eyes. Just then a delightful odor filled the air and with its fragrance calmed their souls which were still terrified by the sudden light. Since they could not bear the brightness, Romula tried to console them. Looking at her spiritual mother Redempta, who stood at the bedside trembling, she said in a pleasant voice, 'Do not fear, mother, I shall not die yet.' As she kept repeating these words, the heavenly light gradually dimmed, while the pleasant odor lingered on. The second and third day passed, and still the fragrance remained undiminished.

The fourth night Romula again called her mistress and asked to receive holy Viaticum. Scarcely had Redempta and her other disciple left the bedside when they saw two choirs of singers standing in the square in front of the convent. The voices they heard, as they told us, were those of men and women, the men singing the psalms and the women the responses. While these ceremonies for her departure were celebrated in front of the entrance, the soul of Romula was set free from the body to be conducted directly to heaven. And as the choirs escorted her soul, rising higher and higher, the sound of their singing gradually diminished, until finally the music of the psalms and the sweetness of the odor vanished altogether.

(17) Sometimes our Creator and Redeemer Himself appears to a departing soul to offer it consolation. As an example of this I wish to repeat here what I wrote in the homilies on

the Gospels[12] about my aunt Tarsilla. She and her two sisters had reached a high degree of sanctity together through a life of constant prayer, recollection and severe self-denial. On one occasion my grandfather Felix,[13] Bishop of Rome, appeared to her in a vision and showed her the home of eternal bliss, saying, 'Come! I will receive you into this dwelling of light.'

Shortly after, she was struck down by a fever and brought to death's door. Many people came to console the near relatives, as is the custom when one of the nobility is about to die. Consequently, a goodly number of men and women had gathered round her bed at the time of her death. Suddenly she looked up and saw Jesus coming. She turned to her visitors with a look of great concern. 'Stand back! Stand back!' she exclaimed. 'Jesus is coming.' While she directed her gaze intenly on the vision, her holy soul took its leave from the body. With this, a refreshing fragrance filled the room, indicating to all the presence of Him who is the source of all that is fragrant and refreshing.

When her body was washed in preparation for burial, her elbows and knees were found covered with a thick skin like that of a camel. Thus, in death, her body gave witness to the many hours she had spent in pious prayer.

(18) I will also include the story Probus told me about his little sister Musa. One night the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, appeared to her and showed her other little girls of her own age dressed in white. Though Musa was eager to be with them, she did not dare join their ranks. Noticing this, the Blessed Virgin asked her whether she wished to be with them in her court. Naturally, the little

12 *Ibid.* 2.38.15 (*PL* 76.1290-92).
13 Pope Felix III (483-492).

girl said she did. Whereupon, our Blessed Lady commanded her not to do anything silly, as foolish little girls often do; instead, she was to keep from laughing and joking, and to remember at all times that in thirty days she would be one of the little girls in white.

After the vision the girl's character was completely changed. She took herself in hand and with great strictness avoided every kind of girlish foolishness. Her astounded parents asked her for an explanation of this sudden change. She told them that the Blessed Virgin had given her special instruction and had set the day on which she was to join her companions in heaven. After the twenty-fifth day she fell sick with a fever. On the thirtieth, as the hour of her death drew near, she saw the Blessed Virgin coming to her with the same train of girls. Our Blessed Lady called to her, and little Musa reverently lowered her eyes as she answered with a clear voice, 'I am coming, my noble Lady, I am coming to you.' With these words she gave up her soul. Leaving her virginal body here below, she set out to live with the holy virgins of heaven.

PETER

Since the human race is subject to countless vices, I am inclined to think that the heavenly Jerusalem is filled mostly with infants and children.

GREGORY

(19) Even though we must believe that all baptized children who die in their infancy go to heaven, we should not suppose that all children, once they have learned how to speak, will enter the kingdom of heaven; sometimes

parents close the gates of heaven against their own children by not giving them proper upbringing.

For example, about three years ago, there was a man here at Rome well known to all. He had a son about five years old. Because of an all too human affection, the father was remiss in training the child. As a result, this little boy used to blaspheme the infinite majesty of God whenever anything did not go according to his wishes. A lamentable fact, indeed. During the pestilence three years ago, the boy became deathly sick. In order to quiet him, the anxious father held him in his arms, but the boy, as eye-witnesses tell me, seeing the evil spirits coming at him, hid his terror-stricken face in his father's arms and shouted, 'Hold them back. Hold them back!' When his father asked him what he had seen to make him tremble so, the boy answered, 'Devils were after me to take me away.' Then, uttering a blasphemy, he died.

By allowing him to repeat with his dying breath the blasphemy which the father had failed to correct, God wished to call attention to the sin of neglect which delivered the boy into the hands of the his executioners. It was God's patience that allowed the boy to continue his blasphemies; it was an act of His supreme judgment that the boy should die with a blasphemy on his lips. The father recognized his sin. In neglecting the soul of his little son he had made of him a sinner worthy of the fires of hell. But now, let us turn from these sad accounts to consider again the happier events we were describing.

(20) It was from the same Probus and some other saintly men that I learned the events I related about Abbot Stephen in my homilies on the Gospels.[14] As Probus and the others tell me, Stephen was a man who owned nothing in this

14 *Hom. in Evang.* 2.35.8 (*PL* 76.1263-64).

world, and looked for nothing. Above all, he loved poverty with God, practiced patience in adversity, and avoided the gatherings of the worldy minded. His one great desire was to spend all his time at prayer. I wish to mention but one example of his virtues, and from this one we can judge all the others.

Once, after Stephen had cut the grain and stored it in the barn, some envious persons spurred on by the Devil himself set fire to it, destroying it completely. Stephen had sowed this crop with his own hands and the monks depended on it as their only supply of food for the year. A man who had witnessed the unholy deed informed him of what had taken place and added: 'A sad, sad thing has happened to you, Father Stephen.' 'It is a sad thing, rather, for him who burned the grain,' calmly answered Stephen, 'for nothing has actually happened to me.' These words help us understand the heights of sanctity he had reached, since he could accept with perfect unconcern the loss of the only possession he had in this world. In fact, he found more reason to grieve for the culprit who committed the sin, than for himself who suffered the damage. Taking no account of his own temporal loss, he considered only the sinner's spiritual harm.

In his last days, when death was hovering near, many people came to commend themselves to his holy soul before it took its leave from this world. Some of those who stood round his bed at the time became speechless with amazement when they saw angels entering the room. Others saw nothing at all. But everyone was struck with fear, and none of them could remain in the room at the soul's departure. All of them without exception, those who had seen the angels as well as those who had seen nothing, fled the room in terror. The power that received this soul at death must have been mighty indeed, for no human being could endure its presence

(21) We must realize, however, that sometimes the worthiness of the soul is not made known at the time of its departure, but becomes evident only later on. This was the case with the martyrs, who at their death suffered many cruel tortures from the infidels. Yet, as I have mentioned, they now shine forth brilliantly with the miracles wrought at their tombs.

(22) The revered Valentio, who later was my abbot in my monastery here at Rome, had previously ruled his own monastery in the province of Valeria. One day the fierce Lombards entered his monastery, as he himself told me, and, seizing two of his monks, killed them by hanging them from the branch of a tree. In the evening the spirits of these two monks began to chant psalms with strong, clear voices. The murderers, hearing their voices, were overcome with amazement and terror. All the captives present in the camp also heard their voices and later testified to the truth of this miracle. God wished to have the voices of these spirits reach human ears, so that human beings might learn in a human way that if they serve God zealously they will live their true lives hereafter.

(23) While I was a monk at Rome I was told about the saintly Suranus, abbot of a monastery in Sura, a neighboring province. The story is vouched for by God-fearing men. Being abbot during the Lombard invasion, Suranus distributed the goods of his monastery in alms to those who escaped from Lombard imprisonment or were fleeing from their marauding hordes. After giving away all his own clothing and that of the monks and using up all the foodstuffs in the storeroom, he even distributed the produce from the garden. When everything had been given away, the Lombards suddenly made their appearance. They wanted gold. The abbot, held fast by the Lombards, explained to them that he possessed

nothing whatsoever. Whereupon they led him to a hill nearb covered by heavy woods, and here one of the barbariar struck him a fatal blow with a sword. A prisoner who ha escaped from the Lombards lay hidden in a hollow tre on this very spot. When the abbot's body fell to the groun a quick tremor shook the forest on the hilltop. It was as the earth openly declared that the fall of this great saint w too much for it to bear.

(24) A saintly deacon of the province of Marsia fell int the hands of the Lombards, and was decapitated by one them with a sword. When the body fell to the ground, a unclean spirit seized the murderer and cast him at the fe of the prostrate corpse. This Lombard was delivered int the power of God's enemy because he had killed God friend.

PETER

Can you tell me why it is that almighty God allows H saints to die in this way, yet after their death causes the hig degree of their sanctity to become known to all?

GREGORY

It is written in the Scriptures, 'But the just man, thou he die early, shall be at rest.'[15] What, then, does it matt to the just if they undergo harsh treatment at death, sin they are on their way to eternal life? Sometimes, perhap it is a fault of theirs, slight though it be, that has to expiated by such a death. For this reason the reprobate a given power over the just while they are still alive. But, on the just have died, the wicked are punished all the mo

15 Wisd. 4.7.

severely because of the cruel power they exercised against holy men. This is demonstrated in the case of the barbarian who was permitted by God to strike down the deacon, but was not allowed to rejoice over his death. It is also verified in holy Scripture.

(25) The man of God, for instance, who was sent to Samaria stopped on the way for a meal, contrary to God's command. For this disobedience he was killed by a lion. But Scripture at once adds that the ass and the lion were standing by the dead prophet, and 'the lion had not eaten of the dead body.'[16]

From this passage we see that the sin of disobedience was atoned for by his death, because the lion attacked the living prophet and killed him, yet did not dare touch him once he was dead. God allowed the beast to kill, but not to eat of its kill, because the prophet, though blameworthy in life, was sanctified in the death he suffered as a punishment for his disobedience. In the first instance the lion took away the life of a sinner; in the second he stood guard over the body of a just man.

PETER

I am pleased with your answer. I should now like to know whether the souls of the just are received into heaven before they are finally united to their bodies.

GREGORY

(26) We cannot affirm or deny this of all the elect for there are just souls who are delayed somewhere outside heaven. The delay imposed on them seems to indicate that they are still lacking in perfect justice. Yet, nothing is more

16 3 Kings 13.28.

certain than that the souls of those who have attained perfec justice are received into the kingdom of heaven as soon a they leave the body. Christ Himself is our witness when H says, 'It is where the body lies that the eagles will gather.'[1] For, wherever our Redeemer is bodily present, there the soul of the just will gather. And St. Paul desires to have don with the present life, 'and be with Christ.'[18] We firml believe that Christ is in heaven. Should we, then, not believ that the soul of Paul is there, too? For, in writing abou his death and the life in heaven, he says, 'Once this earthl tent-dwelling of ours has come to an end, God, we are sur has a solid building waiting for us, a dwelling not made wit hands, that will last eternally in heaven.'[19]

PETER

If the souls of the just are already in heaven, how is that they will receive the reward for their justice on the da of judgment?

GREGORY

The just will indeed see an increase in their reward on th day of judgment, inasmuch as up till then they enjoye only the bliss of the soul. After the judgment, howeve they will also enjoy bodily bliss, for the body in which the suffered grief and torments will also share in their happines In regard to this double glory the Scriptures say, 'They sha receive double in their land.'[20] It is in reference to a tim

17 Luke 17.37.
18 Phil. 1.23.
19 2 Cor. 5.1.
20 Isa. 61.7.

before the day of resurrection that they say of the elect, 'Whereupon a white robe was given to each of them, and they were bidden to take their rest a little while longer, until their number had been made up by those others, their brethren and fellow-servants.'[21] Those, therefore, who receive each a single robe are going to receive a double robe on the day of judgment. Just as they rejoice now only in the glory of their soul, they will then rejoice in the double glory of body and soul.

PETER

I agree with what you say. Now I would like to know how it happens that people so often make predictions when they are at the point of death.

GREGORY

(27) Sometimes it is through a subtle power of their own that souls can foresee the future. At other times the future is made known to them through revelation shortly before death. Again, they are sometimes divinely inspired when they are on the point of leaving the body, and thus enabled to gaze upon the secrets of the heavenly kingdom with the incorporeal eye of their mind.

There is evidence to show that sometimes the soul by its own subtle powers has knowledge of the future. Take, for example, the life of the lawyer Cumquodeus. He lived here at Rome and died of pleurisy about two years ago. Shortly before he died, he called for his servant and asked him to prepare his clothes, for he was going out. The servant disregarded the command, thinking his master was delirious. So the lawyer got out of bed, clothed himself and announced

21 Apoc. 6.11.

that he was going to the Church of St. Sixtus on the Via Appia.

In a short time his illness became critical and he died. After some consultation, it was decided that his body should be laid to rest in the Church of St. Januarius on the Via Praenestina. But the pall-bearers thought this was too far away. A new plan was quickly formed and, without realizing what the sick man had said, the bearers went along the Via Appia and laid the body to rest in the church which the lawyer had designated before his death.

Since we know this lawyer was deeply engrossed in secular affairs, craving for earthly gain, how could he have foretold this future event if he had not seen it through the natural, subtle forces of his own soul?

But, frequently, knowledge of the future is given to the dying by revelation. This we can observe from some of the experiences in our monasteries. In my monastery, for example, there was a brother named Gerontius, who, about ten years ago, was overtaken by a severe illness. At night, in a vision, he saw men in shining white robes coming down from heaven into the monastery. When all of them had taken their places besides his bed, one of them said, 'We have come to Gregory's monastery to enroll some of the brethren in our militia.' Then, turning to a companion of his, he said, 'Write down the names of Marcellus, Valentinian, and Agnellus.' He mentioned some others, too, whose names I cannot remember at the moment. When these names had been written down, he said, 'Add also the name of this man who is now looking at us.'

The next morning, relying on the information he had received in this vision, Gerontius told his brethren the names of the monks who would die, not forgetting to mention that he himself would follow the others. On the appointed day

the monks died in the order in which they had been named. Gerontius himself was the last to die.

During the plague which devasted Rome three years ago with terrible loss of life, there was a monk by the name of Mellitus in the monastery at Ostia. He was still a young man, but had acquired a remarkable degree of simplicity and humility. When his appointed hour came, he contracted the plague. Hearing of his sickness, Bishop Felix of Ostia, who is also the source for this account, hastened to Mellitus' bedside and with persuasive and comforting words assured him there was no reason to fear death. In fact, he even promised that God in His mercy would grant him an extention of life. But the sick monk answered that his span of life had come to an end. A young man had appeared to him with a letter, he said, commanding him to open it and read. On opening it, he had found his own name and the names of all the others whom Bishop Felix had baptized at Easter time written down in letters of gold. His own name had appeared first on the list, followed by the others. For this reason he was certain that he and the others would die very soon.

He died the same day, and the others followed shortly after. Thus, within a few days, the entire group of those who had been baptized together passed away. We can be sure, therefore, that the saintly monk Mellitus had seen their names written in gold because they had been entered into the book of eternal life.

Souls like these had knowledge of the future through revelation. There are other souls who at the time of death have a foretaste of the mysteries of heaven, not through dreams, but in a state of full awareness. Take, for example, the incident brought to my attention by Ammonius, a monk

of my monastery. You know him well. While he was still leading a secular life, he had married the daughter of Valerian, an attorney in Rome, to whom he became very much attached and was frequently found in his company. This also explains his thorough acquaintance with all the details of Valerian's household.

After entering my monastery, he told me of an event that occurred during the terrible plague which devastated Rome in the days of the patrician Narses. The attorney Valerian had a servant in his home by the name of Armentarius, a boy of unusual simplicity and humility. When the plague struck this household, the boy was one of its first victims and death carried him off in a short time. But he quickly returned to life and asked to see his master. 'I have been in heaven,' he said, 'and have found out what members of this household are going to die.' After mentioning some of them by name, he told his master not to fear because he was not to die at this time. 'But,' he continued, 'to prove to you that I am speaking the truth and that I really was in heaven, I must tell you that I received the power of speaking all languages. You were aware of my complete ignorance of Greek. But I shall speak Greek to you now and you will realize that I received the gift of tongues from heaven.'

Then his master spoke to him in Greek, and all were astonished to hear the boy answer in the same language. Narses' sword-bearer, a Bulgarian, lived in the same house. So he, too, was brought to the sickbed to speak to the boy in Bulgarian. Though born and raised in Italy, the boy answered the sword-bearer in his own language, as if he were his fellow countryman. All were amazed. Having tried the boy's ability in these two languages of which he had been completely ignorant before, the family was now convinced

that the boy could speak all languages even though he was not able to prove his powers to the full at this time. He remained alive for two days. On the third day, through an unknown judgment of God, he died in a frenzy, biting his hands and arms. All those whose death he had foretold were taken one by one, while the rest of the household was spared.

PETER

It is a terrifying thing to hear that he was afflicted with this dread punishment after he had been singularly blessed with the gift of tongues.

GREGORY

Who can comprehend the hidden judgments of God? When His judgments are beyond our understanding, we should stand before them in awe rather than with a questioning mind.

(28) But to continue the exposition we began about departing souls and their knowledge of the future, I must tell you about Theophane, Count of Centum Cellae.[22] While I was stationed in that city I heard many reports about him. He was a man given to acts of mercy, always ready to undertake a good work, zealous in practicing hospitality, and actively engaged in performing the duties of his office as count. He was busy with the temporal concerns of this world, but, as became clear later, more through a sense of duty than by choice.

When he was on the point of death, and a spell of very bad weather would have made his burial impossible, his

22 Modern Civitavecchia.

wife, all in tears, came to him for advice. 'What shall I do?' she asked. 'How can I take you out for burial if I myself cannot go beyond the threshold of the house on account of the storm?' 'Do not weep, my dear,' he told her. 'As soon as I am dead fair weather will return.'

With this he died, and just then the sky became clear. Other signs accompanied this change. His hands and feet, swollen with the gout, had broken open into running sores. When his body was being prepared for the customary washing, his hands and feet were found completely healed as if they had never been infected. He was then given proper burial. Four days later, his wife decided to replace the marble slab over his tomb. When the slab was removed, a fragrant odor rose from the grave as though his remains were not in a state of corruption, the prey of worms, but permeated with aromatic balm.

When I mentioned this miracle in one of my sermons,[23] some people of weak faith expressed doubts about the truth of my statement. Later, at a meeting of nobles, the workmen who had removed the marble from the tomb came to question me about some difficulties they had. So in the presence of the clergy, the nobility, and the people, I asked them about the miracle. They declared that the fragrant odor at the tomb was the result of a miracle, and added other details about the burial to substantiate their words. It would take too long for me to repeat all their statements here.

PETER

You have answered my inquiries very satisfactorily. But there is still one question that keeps troubling my mind. A

23 *Hom. in Evang.* 2.36.13 (*PL* 76.1273).

little while ago you said the souls of the saints are already in heaven. We should therefore also believe that the souls of the wicked are in hell. I do not know what Christ has taught us in this regard, but from human reason we should conclude that the souls of sinners could not be punished until the day of judgment.

GREGORY

(29) If you believe on the basis of God's word that the souls of the saints are in heaven, you must also believe that the souls of the wicked are in hell. For, if eternal justice brings God's chosen ones to glory, does it not follow that it also brings the wicked to their doom? The saints, then, rejoice in bliss, and we cannot but believe that from the day of their death the reprobate burn in fire.

PETER

What reason have we to believe that a physical fire can attack an incorporeal substance?

GREGORY

(30) If the incorporeal spirit of a living man is held fast in the body, why should the incorporeal spirit after death not be held fast in corporeal fire?

PETER

In a living person the incorporeal spirit is held in the body because it imparts life to the body.

GREGORY

If the incorporeal spirit can be held in the body to which it gives life, why should it not be held for punishment in a place where it endures punishment? When we say that the spirit is held by fire we mean that it is in torment of fire by seeing and feeling. Seeing the fire, it begins to suffer, and when it sees itself attacked by flames it feels the burning. In this way a corporeal substance burns an incorporeal one, because an invisible burn and an invisible pain are received from visible fire. In this physical fire, therefore, the incorporeal mind is tortured with an incorporeal fire that causes pain, although from the words of Scripture we gather that the soul suffers from the burning heat, not only through its sense of sight, but also by actually experiencing the pain. We know from Christ's words that the rich man was buried in hell, and his prayer to Abraham declares that his soul was held in fire. 'Send Lazarus,' he says, 'to dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; I am tormented in this flame.'[24] Since Christ describes the condemned sinner Dives surrounded by the flames of hell, no one with understanding would deny that the souls of the wicked are held fast in fire.

PETER

The demands of reason and the authority of Scripture incline me to believe. But left to itself, my mind stubbornly returns to the question, for how can an incorporeal substance be held and tortured by one that is corporeal? This is beyond my comprehension.

24 Luke 16.24.

GREGORY

Tell me this, Peter. Do you think that the apostate spirits who were cast down from their heavenly glory were corporeal or incorporeal?

PETER

Who in his right senses would say that a spirit is corporeal?

GREGORY

Well then, would you say the fire of hell is incorporeal or corporeal?

PETER

I am firmly convinced that the fire of hell is corporeal and that bodies are tortured in it.

GREGORY

On the last day Christ will say to the wicked, 'Go far from me, you that are accursed, into that eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels.'[25] If these incorporeal beings, the Devil and his angels, are going to be tortured by physical fire, is it incredible that souls should be able to suffer physical torments even before they are again united with the body?

PETER

The point is now clear, and I should not be troubled with further doubts on this question.

25 Matt. 25.41.

GREGORY

(31) After all the difficulty you had in settling your doubts, I believe it worth while to relate here a story that I have on good, trustworthy authority. Julian, the second defender of the church at Rome, where by God's grace I now preside, often came to visit me in my monastery in order to discuss the interests of his soul. He died about seven years ago. One day he told me the following story.

'In the days of King Theodoric,' he said, 'my son-in-law's father was collecting taxes in Sicily. Once on his way back to Italy, his ship was driven ashore on the island of Lipari, which happens to be the home of a hermit known for his extraordinary spiritual powers. While the sailors were reparing the ship's rigging, my kinsman and his men decided to pay the saintly man a visit and beg a remembrance in his prayers. During their visit, while conversing on various subjects, the man of God asked them whether they knew that King Theodoric had died. "But that cannot be!" they exclaimed. "For when we left, he was alive, and no word has reached us yet of his death." The servant of God assured them he had died. "Yesterday," he said, "at three o'clock, Pope John and the patrician Symmachus led him, disrobed and barefoot, with his hands in chains, to the brink of a neighboring volcano and cast him into its flaming abyss."

'Hearing this, the visitors carefully noted the day, and, on reaching Italy, discovered that Theodoric had died on the day indicated by the saintly hermit. Because he had killed Pope John with the hardships of imprisonment and had executed the patrician Symmachus with the sword, it seems very proper that the vision should show these two men hurling Theodoric into hell, since he had condemned both of them unjustly.'

(32) When I first experienced the desire to embrace monastic life, I was frequently in the company of an old

man, a friend of mine named Deusdedit. He was known for his uprightness and was on very friendly terms with the nobility of Rome. It is from him that I have the following story.

'In the time of the Goths,' he said, 'a prominent man named Reparatus was nearing his death. After he had been lying silent and motionless for some time, it became evident that all breathing had ceased and that the body was a lifeless corpse. While the crowd that had gathered round the body was grieving with the members of his family over his death, Reparatus suddenly came back to life. The mourners' sorrow turned into amazement. The first thing he said was, "Send a messenger to the Church of St. Lawrence the Martyr, which is called 'The Damasus Church' after its builder, to see how things stand with the priest Tiburtius, and have him bring back a report at once."

'Now, Tiburtius had the reputation of being a dissolute and sensual man, and as such he is also well remembered by Florentius, who is now the priest in charge of that church. After the messenger had set out, Reparatus described what he had heard and seen during his stay in the next world. "An immense pyre had been prepared," he said "and the priest Tiburtius was brought in and placed on top of it. Fire was then set to the huge mass and the unfortunate priest perished in the flames. But there was a second pyre, whose summit seemed lost in the sky, and a loud voice was heard shouting, 'Whose pyre is this?' " Having said this, Reparatus died. The priest Tiburtius, too, was found dead when the messenger arrived.'

His journey to hell, his return and description of what he had seen, and his subsequent death, indicate that all this did not happen for Reparatus' own benefit, but as a warning for us that we should use the opportunities given us to correct our evil ways. And the prye of wood which Reparatus saw

does not mean that wood is burned in hell. It was meant, rather, to give him a vivid picture of the fires of hell, so that, in describing them to the people, they might learn to fear the eternal fire through their experience with natural fire.

(33) The saintly Maximian, Bishop of Syracuse, who for a long time was abbot of my monastery here in Rome, told me of a shocking incident that occurred in the province of Valeria. 'A city official,' he said, 'acted as sponsor at the baptism of a young girl one Easter Saturday. On his return home after the long fast, he drank wine to excess. Begging the girl to stay at his home for the night, he committed the unspeakable crime of seducing her. When he got up in the morning, his guilty conscience plagued him, and he began to consider whether he should take a bath, as if water could wash away the stain of his sin. So he proceeded to wash, and then began to tremble at the thought of going to church. But, if he would not go to church on the great feast of Easter, what would people say? And, if he went, he stood in dread of God's judgment. Human respect won the day. He went to church, but trembled with fear, suspecting every moment to be handed over to the unclean spirit to be tormented in the presence of the entire congregation. Though he was in constant dread, nothing happened to him during the celebration of the Easter Mass. He left the church in a happy mood. Next day, he entered the church feeling more secure. For six days he continued in this way without any worries, thinking that God had either not seen his crime or in His mercy had forgiven it.

'On the seventh day, however, sudden death overtook him. After his burial, tongues of fire were seen issuing from his grave. These continued to burn for a long time, feeding on his remains until they had consumed them entirely, causing the mound of earth over the burial place to cave in.

'By decreeing that this man's body be visibly consumed in fire, almighty God indicated the kind of punishment his soul was enduring unseen. By the example of this incident God gives us a lesson in fear, for, when we see that even the insensible bones are consumed in fire, we learn to understand the terrible sufferings a living, sensitive soul must endure for its sins.'

PETER

I would like to know whether the saints in heaven recognize each other, and whether this likewise holds true of the damned in hell.

GREGORY

(34) An explanation of this question is very clearly set down by our Lord in the passage I referred to above.[26] 'There was a rich man once,' He says, 'that was clothed in purple and lawn, and feasted sumptuously every day. And there was a beggar, called Lazarus, who lay at his gate, covered with sores, wishing that he could be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table, but none was ready to give them to him; the very dogs came and licked his sores.' And he adds that Lazarus after his death was carried 'by the angels to Abraham's bosom,' while the rich man died 'and found his grave in hell. And there, in his suffering, he lifted up his eyes, and saw Abraham far off, and Lazarus in his bosom. And he said, with a loud cry, Father Abraham, take pity on me; send Lazarus to dip the

26 Luke 16.19-28.

tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue.' And Abraham said to him, 'My son, remember that thou didst receive thy good fortune in thy lifetime, and Lazarus, no less, his ill fortune.'

Despairing of his own salvation, the rich man now tried to save the members of his family. 'Father,' he said, 'I pray thee send him to my own father's house; for I have five brethren; let him give these a warning, so that they may not come, in their turn, into this place of suffering.'

Obviously, the good recognize each other and so do the wicked. If Abraham had not known Lazarus and his past trials, he surely would not have spoken to the rich man in hell about the misfortunes Lazarus had suffered in his lifetime. And if evil men did not recognize their own kind, the rich man in his torments would not have been solicitous about his absent brothers on earth. Surely he would not fail to recognize them when present, if he remembered to pray for them when they were absent.

This parable explains another point which you overlooked in your inquiry, namely, that the good recognize the wicked and vice versa. Abraham recognized Dives when he said, 'Thou didst receive good fortune in thy lifetime.' In like manner, Dives recognized Lazarus, even mentioning him by name when he said to Abraham: 'Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue.' This mutual recognition has a profound effect on the eternal status of souls. The good rejoice the more to see their loved ones in a happy eternity with them; the wicked, on the other hand, seeing themselves punished with those whom they loved in their godless life on earth, are tormented not

only by their own sufferings, but also by the sufferings of their friends.

But there is something even more wonderful in store for God's chosen ones. They will recognize not only those whom they knew on earth, but many saintly men and women whom they had never seen before will appear to them as old friends. And so, when they meet the saints of the ancient past, they will not appear unfamiliar to them, for they always knew them through their deeds. The saints behold God with a clarity common to all. Why, then, should anything be unknown to them in heaven where they know God, the all-knowing?

(35) One of our monks, a holy man of very praiseworthy life, died about four years ago. In his last moments, as those present at his death testify, he saw the Prophets Jonas, Ezechiel, and Daniel, and called these great masters by name. Then, saying that they were approaching, he closed his eyes out of reverence for them, and so died. Now, if this man, still shrouded in corruptible flesh, could recognize the holy Prophets whom he surely never saw before, we can readily understand what our knowledge will be in the incorruptible life of eternal glory.

(36) It frequently happens that a soul on the point of death recognizes those with whom it is to share the same eternal dwelling for equal blame or reward. Eleutherius, the saintly old man of whom I had much to say in the preceding book, related how his brother John, a monk in his monastery, had foretold his death to the brethren fourteen days before it occurred, and kept count of the days as they passed. Three days before he died, he became sick with a

fever. When the hour of death drew near, he received the sacrament of the Lord's Body and Blood. Then, calling his brethren round him, he asked them to chant the psalms, he himself specifying the following verse to be used as antiphon: 'Open to me the gates of justice; I will enter them and give thanks to the Lord. This gate is the Lord's; the just shall enter it.'[27] While his fellow monks assisted him in his last hour with the singing of psalms, he called in a loud, protracted voice, 'Ursus, come,' then passed away. The monks were puzzled, not knowing what the dying man's call meant. There was great sorrow in the monastery because of his death.

Four days later, several monks were sent to another monastery somewhat far away, to get some necessary supplies. The monks who went found the entire community in mourning when they arrived. 'What is the meaning of this?' they asked. 'Why all this sadness?' 'We are mourning,' they replied, 'over the desolation of this place. The one man whose holy life kept us united in this monastery has died. He was taken from us four days ago.'

On asking his name, they were told it was Ursus. Inquiring further about the hour of his death, they found that it coincided exactly with the moment when their fellow monk John had called him. We may conclude that these two monks were equal in merit and that, just as they died together, they would also live together in one dwelling in heaven.

I would also like to include here an incident I heard about some of our neighbors in Rome while I was still a layman living in the house I had inherited from my father. Our next-door neighbor, the widow Galla, had a son, a young

27 Ps. 117.19,20.

man by the name of Eumorphius. Not very far from him lived a military adjutant called Stephen. Now, when Eumorphius was nearing death, he called his servant and said to him, 'Go quickly and tell Stephen to come at once, because our ship is ready to take us to Sicily.' Thinking his master out of his right mind, the servant refused to obey. This made the master more insistent. 'Go,' he ordered, 'tell him what I said, and do not think I am raving.'

So the boy set out to inform Stephen. He had gone halfway when he was met by another messenger, who asked him where he was going. 'To Stephen the adjutant,' he said 'as my master told me.' 'But I just left Stephen's house,' answered the other in surprise. 'I saw him die this very hour.' The servant hurried back to Eumorphius, only to find him dead. Judging from the distance covered by the servant in going half way, receiving the message and then returning home, we find that both men had died at the same moment.

PETER

What an astonishing story! But tell me, why did a ship appear to the dying man, and why did he say that he was being taken to Sicily?

GREGORY

The soul has no need of a conveyance. But it is not surprising that in the vision a man of flesh and blood saw an object which was physically real to him, and through it was given to undersand that the soul is transported spiritually. That he should sail to Sicily is best explained by recalling

that in the islands around Sicily there are more open pits burning with fires from hell than in any other region. And these are becoming larger every day, as well-informed people tell us, for, with the end of the world approaching, it seems that the openings to hell are enlarged in order to receive the great number of lost souls who will be gathered there to be cast into eternal punishment. God made these fires appear on the surface of the earth in order to correct the minds of men. Unbelievers who had heard of the torments of hell and still refused to believe were to see these realms of torture with their own eyes.

And why are the souls of good men and of wicked men separated into groups to live in common dwellings acording to their common status of good or evil? Christ Himself gives us the answer and His words would suffice even if we had no examples to cite. He was speaking in behalf of the chosen ones when He said, 'There are many dwelling-places in my Father's house.'[28] If there were no distinction of rewards in that blessed abode, there should be but one dwelling-place, not many. As it is, the dwelling-places in heaven are numerous in order to keep the ranks of good souls distinct and allow them to enjoy the companionship of those of like merits. Yet, it is said that all those who labored received each a silver piece,[29] though now they are separated into distinct groups with many dwellings. The bliss, namely, which they enjoy is one and the same, but the reward they earn for their different degrees of good works is unequal. This is doubtless what Christ means in His description of the day of judgment. 'I will give the word to the reapers,' He says. 'Gather up the tares first, and tie them in bundles

28 John 14.2.
29 Cf. Matt. 20.9-14

to be burned.'[30] The reapers who gather the tares in bundles to be burned are the angels. They will gather the souls of men, grouping like with like for like torments: the proud to be burned with the proud, the lustful with the lustful, the avaricious with the avaricious, the dishonest with the dishonest, the envious with the envious, and the faithless with the faithless. And since angels assign these sinners to their proper places, keeping likes with likes for similar punishment, they are said to gather the tares in bundles to be burned.

PETER

(37) My questions have been fully answered by your clear discussion. But can you please tell me how it is that some are called out of this world by mistake and come back to life again, claiming that they were told to return because the summons had not been for them but for someone else.

GREGORY

Whenever this occurs, Peter, a careful consideration will reveal that it was not an error, but a warning. In His unbounded mercy, the good God allows some souls to return to their bodies shortly after death, so that the sight of hell might at last teach them to fear the eternal punishments in which words alone could not make them believe.

A monk of Illyria, who was with me in my monastery here in Rome, used to tell me of his experiences as a hermit in the desert. A Spanish monk, by the name of Peter, was a fellow hermit with him in the vast solitude of Evasa. Before

30 Matt. 13.30.

undertaking to live in the desert, Peter had become sick and died. On being restored to life, he declared that he had seen hell with all its torments and countless pools of fire. He also mentioned seeing some of this world's outstanding men tossing in the flames. When his turn came to be cast into the fire, an angel in shining white robes suddenly appeared to prevent him from being buried in the burning mass. 'Leave this place,' he said, 'and consider well how you are to live henceforth.' With this Peter came back to earth, and the warmth of life gradually returned to the limbs of his body. On waking from this sleep of death, he described all that had happened to him. But, even had he kept silent, his penitential fasts and night watches would have been eloquent witnesses to his terrifying visit to hell and his deep fear of its dreadful torments. God had shown Himself most merciful by not allowing him to die in this experience with death.

But, due to the hardness of men's hearts, the sight of hell is not equally beneficial for all. Stephen, a man of high rank, whom you know very well, used to tell me about himself. During one of his trips to Constantinople on some matters of business, he became ill and died. Since no doctor or mortician could be found that day to open and embalm his body, it was kept until the following night. Meanwhile, Stephen was conducted into the regions of hell, where he saw many things he had heard about before but had never believed. When he was brought before the infernal court for trial, the judge dismissed his case, saying, 'I ordered Stephen the blacksmith to be brought here, not this man.' So he was immediately sent back to earth. Now, during that very same hour his neighbor, Stephen the blacksmith, died,

and through his death proved that everything Stephen had heard was true.

This Stephen, as you recall, died three years ago of the horrible plague which devastated Rome. During that time arrows could be seen hurled down from the sky, carrying death to many individuals. A soldier at Rome was struck down in this way. He did not remain dead very long, however, for, shortly after dying, he came back to life and told what had happened to him. The scene he described—one that became familar to many others at this time—was as follows. He saw a river whose dark waters were covered by a mist of vapors that gave off an unbearable stench. Over the river was a bridge. It led to pleasant meadows beyond, covered by green grass and dotted with richly scented flowers. These meadows seemed to be the gathering places for people dressed in white robes. The fragrant odors pervading the region were a delight for all who lived there. Everyone had his own dwelling, which gleamed with brilliant light. One house of magnificent proportions was still under construction and the bricks used were made of gold. But no one could tell for whom the house was meant. There were houses also along the banks of the river, some of which were infected by the vapors and stench rising from the river, while others remained untouched.

On this bridge saint and sinner underwent a final test. The unjust would slip off and fall into the dark, foul waters. The just, unhampered by sin, could walk over it, freely and without difficulty, to the beautiful meadows on the other side. Below this bridge the soldier saw Peter, an overseer of the church who died four years ago, lying prone in the foul mire loaded down with heavy iron chains. When

he asked why such terrible punishment was inflicted on him, the answer he received harmonizes well with what we of this household remember of Peter's life and actions. 'He suffers these torments,' he was told, 'because whenever he was ordered to administer punishment, he would deal out the blows in a spirit of cruelty rather than of obedience.' Everyone acquainted with Peter knows this is true.

According to the soldier's description, he also saw a priest of some foreign country stepping onto the bridge and walking over it with all the confidence that a life of sincerity had won for him. On the same bridge he saw and recognized the Stephen whom we mentioned above. In trying to cross the river, Stephen had slipped and fallen, leaving the lower half of his body dangling over the edge of the bridge. Some fiendish men from the river below seized him by the sides and tried to pull him down. At the same time, princely men dressed in white appeared on the bridge to draw him back to safety. While this struggle went on, with the good spirits drawing him up and the evil ones pulling him down, our spectator was called back to earth to be reunited with his body. No one, therefore, knows what the final outcome of this struggle was.

An explanation of this strange vision, however, is found in the life of Stephen, for in him the evils of the flesh carried on a struggle with the noble work of almsdeeds. Those who dragged him downward represent his lustful tendencies which he failed to keep in check. Those who pulled him upward by the hands symoblize his great zeal and love for almsdeeds. Which of the two came out victorious in this final test which Stephen had to undergo at God's ordinance is known neither to us nor to the one who was granted the vision of hell. What is certain, however, is that Stephen did not

perfectly correct his life even after returning to this world from his visit to hell. Consequently, when he died some years later, he still had to undergo a severe struggle to decide his eternal fate.

We might say, then, that a vision of hell and its torments is helpful for some, but for others it is the cause of even graver condemnation. Some are forewarned by these visions and turn from evil. Others, on the contrary, unwilling to avoid hell even after seeing and considering its torments, become all the more blameworthy.

PETER

But how is it that the house in the beautiful meadow was constructed with bricks of gold? It seems rather ridiculous that in eternity we should still need metals of this kind.

GREGORY

Surely, no one with common sense will take the phrase literally. We may not know the person for whom the mansion was constructed, yet from some details of the vision we can tell what kind of good works he must have performed in his lifetime. Since the reward of eternal glory is won by generosity in almsgiving, it seems quite possible to build an eternal dwelling with gold. I had forgotten to mention previously that the soldier who witnessed this vision says that old people and young people, little girls and boys, furnished the golden bricks that were used in the building. Evidently our eternal dwellings in heaven are built by those who benefit from our almsgiving here on earth.

(38) Not far from us there lived a saintly shoemaker called Deusdedit. Someone had received a revelation about him in which he saw a dwelling being built for him by workmen who engaged in their work only on Saturdays. On making careful inquiry, he found out that Deusdedit used to keep for sale only as many shoes as he needed to make a livelihood. The rest he would pack up on Saturday to be sent to the Church of St. Peter for distribution among the poor. It is with good reason, therefore, that his heavenly dwelling was built on Saturdays.

PETER

I am well satisfied with your explanation, but there are still some points I should like to have you explain to me. What is meant by saying that the houses of some were touched by the fumes and mists, and others were not? And then, why did he see a bridge and a river?

GREGORY

We arrive at a true understanding through images. For example, the just were seen passing over a bridge to a beautiful meadow, because the road that leads to eternal life is narrow.[31] The soldier saw a river of polluted water because the noisome stream of carnal vices continues daily to flow on toward the abyss. The dwellings of some were touched by the mist and stench form the river, others were free of this defilement, because there are always some who perform good deeds zealously, yet are stained by sins of the

31 Cf. Matt. 7.14.

flesh through the pleasures of thought. It is, therefore, no more than right that an evil-smelling vapor should surround them hereafter since sensual thoughts delighted them in this life. For this reason, Job, who realized that those who delight in the flesh delight in corruption, passed judgment on the luxurious and lustful sinner when he said, 'May worms be his sweetness.'[32] But those who keep their hearts entirely free of carnal pleasures will have their dwellings untouched by the evil-smelling vapors. And it should be noted that there was a stench and vapors, for the delights of the flesh darken the mind they infect, making any clear vision of the true light impossible. By turning to base pleasures, man shrouds his noblest nature in darkness.

PETER

Do you think one can prove on the authority of Scripture that sins of the flesh are punished with foul odors?

GREGORY

(39) Yes. From the book of Genesis we learn that God poured down on Sodom and its citizens sulphur and fire,[33] and that the fire burned them while the fumes of sulphur killed them. Because they were consumed with carnal lust, they perished in fire and fumes; their punishment would make them realize that they had handed themselves over to eternal death by reveling in their own baseness.

32 Job 24.20.
33 Cf. Gen. 19.24.

PETER

I have no more questions to ask. My doubts have been solved.

GREGORY

(40) We should also keep in mind that sometimes people are given a glimpse of their future punishment while they are fully alive. In some cases, the person himself derives much benefit from the experience; in others, the good lesson is meant for the people who are present and observe what is taking place.

I recall giving an example of this in my sermons to the people.[34] I mentioned the case of Theodore, a very restless young man, who entered my monastery with his brother under force of circumstances rather than of his own free will. He was always irritated when any spiritual lesson was brought home to him. He could not bear doing good or hearing about it. In fact, he would become angry or sarcastic and swear that he had never intended to put on the religious habit or become a monk.

During the plague which recently carried off a large part of the population of this city, Theodore became dangerously ill, with the disease lodging in his abdomen. When he was about to die, the brethren gathered round the bed to offer their prayers for his safe departure from this life to the next. The extremities of his body were now cold with death up to his breast, where the lifeblood was still pulsating warmly. Seeing the end approaching rapidly, his brethren became more fervent in their prayers. Suddenly, the sick

34 *Hom. in Evang.* 2.38.16 (*PL* 76.1292); 1.19.7 (*PL* 76.1158).

man interrupted them. 'Stand back!' he shouted, 'I have been cast out to be devoured by the dragon. Your presence keeps him from doing so, but he has already taken my head into his jaws. Stand back! Don't make him torture me any longer. Let him finish me off, if that is what I am destined for. Why do you make me suffer this suspense?'

The brethren tried to quiet him. 'What is it you are saying?' they asked. 'Bless yourself with the sign of the cross.' In answer, he shouted excitedly, 'I want to bless myself, but cannot because the dragon is holding me in his coils!'

Hearing this, the brethren fell prostrate in prayer and, adding tears to their petitions, begged insistently for his release. Suddenly, with a sigh of relief, the sick brother cried happily, 'Thanks be to God! The dragon who tried to devour me has fled. He could not stand the attack of your prayers. And now please beg God to forgive my sins, for I am ready to live like a real monk and fully determined to abandon my old, worldly ways.'

After recovering from the partial death of his body, this monk offered his life generously to God. With a complete change of heart, he now welcomed afflictions and endured them for a long time until his soul was finally freed from the body.

On the other hand, there was Chrysaorius. Probus, his kinsman, whom I mentioned before, used to tell me about him. Chrysaorius was very rich in this world's goods, but his vices were as abundant as his possessions. He was proud and conceited, a slave to the lusts of the flesh, and burning with avarice to amass more wealth. Now, when the Lord decreed to make an end of all these evils, He struck him with a disease that caused his death. A short time before he died, however, he saw hideous spirits standing before

him, threatening fiercely to carry him to the depths of hell. Pale with terror, trembling and perspiring, he finally burst out in a cry of anguish and begged for a few moments of grace. Then, with a loud, excited voice he called for his son Maximus, a monk whom I met after I myself had become a monk. 'Maximus,' he called, 'come quickly! I never did you any wrong. I entrust myself to your care. Take me!'

In a short time Maximus stood at his side, terribly upset, while the entire family gathered round, weeping and lamenting. Though they could not actually see the evil spirits and their horrible attacks, they could tell from the sick man's own declarations, from the pallor on his face and from his trembling body, that the evil spirits were present. In mortal terror of these horrible images, he kept tossing from side to side on his bed. First, he would lie on his left side. Then, unable to bear the sight, he would turn his face to the wall. There, too, the images appeared. And now, nearly worn out and despairing of any relief, he shouted, 'Give me time until morning! Hold off at least until morning!' With that his life was snatched away.

In this case it is clear that Chrysaorius saw the vision not for his own benefit, but to warn us that God is extremely patient in waiting for us to do good. For, surely, it did not profit this rich man to see the foul spirits before his death. And what did he gain by asking for time to repent, since his request was not granted?

One of our fellow priests, Athanasius of Isauria, tells of a terrifying incident that took place in Iconium during his lifetime. In the monastery called Ton Galathon was a monk reputed for his sanctity and revered for his nobility of character. In all his actions he was most circumspect.

But, as the outcome proves, he was not all he appeared to be. He made his brethren believe he was fasting, while in reality he used to eat in secret, a vice of which his brethren were entirely unaware. Then he became seriously ill, and when he was face to face with death he asked to have the entire community gather round him. In view of his reputation, they expected in all sincerity to hear a noble and inspiring message from his lips. But, trembling in his wretchedness, he was forced to reveal that after death he would be delivered into the power of Satan. 'You thought all along that I was fasting with you,' he said 'but, unknown to you I took food secretly. For this reason I have been handed over to the dragon to be devoured. His tail is now coiled around my feet and knees and, with his head to my mouth, he is stealing the breath of life from me.' Death followed at once, without leaving him time to repent and thus free himself from the dragon who appeared to him so vividly. It was clearly for the benefit of the bystanders that he saw the dragon into whose power he was delivered. He could point him out to others but for himself there was no escape.

PETER

I should like to know if we have to believe in a cleansing fire after death.

GREGORY

(41) In the Gospel our Lord says, 'Finish your journey while you still have the light.'[35] And in the words of the

35 John 12.35.

Prophet He declares, 'In an acceptable time I have heard thee, and in the day of salvation I have helped thee.'[36] St. Paul's comment on this is: 'And here is the time of pardon; the day of salvation has come already.'[37] Solomon, too, says, 'Anything you can turn your hand to, do with what power you have; for there will be no work, nor reason, nor knowledge, nor wisdom in the nether world where you are going.'[38] And David adds, 'For his mercy endures forever.'[39] From these quotations it is clear that each one will be presented to the Judge exactly as he was when he departed this life. Yet, there must be a cleansing fire before judgment, because of some minor faults that may remain to be purged away. Does not Christ, the Truth, say that if anyone blasphemes against the Holy Spirit he shall not be forgiven 'either in this world or in the world to come'?[40] From this statement we learn that some sins can be forgiven in this world and some in the world to come. For, if forgiveness is refused for a particular sin, we conclude logically that it is granted for others. This must apply, as I said, to slight transgressions, such as persistent idle talking, immoderate laughter, or blame in the care of property, which can scarcely be administered without fault even by those who know the faults to be avoided, or errors due to ignorance in matters of no great importance. All these faults are troublesome for the soul after death if they are not forgiven while one is still alive. For, when St. Paul says that Christ is the foundation, he adds: 'But on this foundation different men will build in

36 Isa. 49.8.
37 2 Cor. 6.2.
38 Eccle. 9.10.
39 Ps. 117.1.
40 Matt. 12.32.

gold, silver, precious stones, wood, grass, or straw . . . and fire will test the quality of each man's workmanship. He will receive a reward, if the building he had added on stands firm! if it is burnt up, he will be the loser; and yet he himself will be saved, though only as men are saved by passing through fire.'[41]

Although this may be taken to signify the fire of suffering we experience in this life, it may also refer to the cleansing fire of the world to come, and, if one accepts it in this sense, one must weigh St. Paul's words carefully. When he says that men are saved by passing through fire, he is not referring to men who build on this foundation in iron, bronze, or lead, that is, in mortal sins which are indestructible by fire. He specifies those who build on this foundation in wood, grass, and straw, that is, in venial or trivial sins which fire consumes easily. In this connection we should also remember that in the world to come no one will be cleansed even of the slightest faults, unless he has merited such a cleansing through good works performed in this life.

(42) When I was still a young layman, I heard my elders and men acquainted with the circumstances tell of Paschasius, a deacon of the Apostolic See. His highly orthodox and brilliantly written books on the Holy Spirit are still read. He was a man of outstanding sanctity and very zealous in the practice of almsgiving. His kindness to the poor was remarkable, while for himself he had nothing but contempt. In the dispute over the papacy between the parties of Symmachus and Lawrence, which was accompanied by the excitment of popular demonstrations, he cast his vote for Lawrence. Even though Symmachus was later on accepted

41 1 Cor. 3.12-15.

unanimously by both parties, Paschasius would not change his affiliations, but to the end of his life reserved his devotion and respect for Lawrence, the man whom the Church by the judgment of her bishops had refused to set up as her head.

Paschasius died during the reign of Pope Symmachus. A possessed person touched his dalmatic, which had been laid on the coffin, and was instantly cured. A long time afterward Germanus, Bishop of Capua, whom I have already mentioned,[42] came to the baths of Angulus at his doctor's advice. As he entered the hot baths, he found the deacon Paschasius standing there as an attendant. Germanus was shocked and asked what a man of his dignity was doing in such a place. 'The only reason I am serving here,' the deacon answered, 'is that I endorsed the party of Lawrence against Symmachus. But I beg you, pray for me to the Lord. When you come back and no longer find me here, you will know that your prayers have been heard.'

Germanus, therefore, gave himself to fervent prayer, and, when he returned a few day later, Paschasius no longer appeared. This purification from sin after death was possible because the deacon had sinned through ignorance, and not through malice. What we are to believe is that through his previous almsdeeds he obtained the grace of receiving forgiveness at a time when he was no longer able to do meritorious works.

PETER

(43) Can you tell me why so many truths about the life of the soul which were previously hidden from us have been

42 See above, 2.35; 4.8.

clarified during these last years? It seems that the spiritual world is moving closer to us manifesting itself through visions and revelations.

GREGORY

That is right. For, as the present world approaches its end, the world of eternity looms nearer, manifesting itself by ever clearer signs. Is it not true that in this world it is impossible for us to see each other's hearts? Why, then, should we not compare this world to a dark night, and the life to come to the light of day? In the transitional hour before sunrise, when the night comes to an end and the new day is about to begin, darkness is somehow blended with light until the remaining shadows of the night are perfectly absorbed in the brightness of the coming day. In this way the end of the world merges with the beginnings of eternal life. Earth's remaining shadows begin to fade as the beams of spiritual light filter through them. We can therefore discern many truths about the future life, but we still see them imperfectly, because the light in which we see is still dim and pale, like the light of the sun in the early hours of the day just before dawn.

PETER

I am delighted with your answer. One thing, however, in the life of this distinguished man still puzzles me. How is it that he was committed to a place of punishment when, at the touch of his garment, spread out over the coffin, the evil spirit was cast out of the possessed man?

GREGORY

In this we must recognize God's unbounded and manifold goodness in dealing with us. Paschasius was indeed made to endure a short personal punishment for his sins; on the other hand, the miracles performed through his mortal remains served to gain public recognition for his works of piety, because they had been performed in the presence of the people. In arranging it thus, God safeguarded the high esteem men had for Paschasius and his almsdeeds, and at the same time exacted a penalty for the faults which the saintly man had failed to wash away with his tears, because he did not believe he had done wrong.

PETER

I appreciate what you say. Still, in view of this teaching I cannot help but fear for all my sins, not only for those of which I am conscious, but even for those of which I am ignorant. But were we not speaking a little while ago about the regions of hell and its punishments? Can you tell me, then where hell is located? Is it above or below the earth's surface?

GREGORY

(44) I do not dare to make an offhand statement in this matter, for there are some who think that hell is in a definite place on the earth, and others who think that it is under the earth. But it occurs to me that if we call an object 'infernal' because it lies in a lower position, then hell ought to be 'infernal' to the earth just as the earth is to the sky

This is perhaps what the Psalmist had in mind when he said, 'You have freed my soul from the lower infernal regions.'[43] The earth then is the 'upper infernal,' and lying below this is the 'lower infernal.' The words of St. John, too, are in keeping with this concept. He says he saw a book sealed with seven seals, and, because no one was found worthy to open the seals, either in heaven, or on earth, or under the earth, he 'was all in tears.'[44] Yet, later, he says that the book was opened by the Lion of the Tribe of Juda. This book can refer only to sacred Scriptures, for it was opened by no one but Christ our Redeemer, who became man, and by His death, resurrection, and ascension opened the way to all the mysteries it contained. No one in heaven opened it, because no angel could; no one on earth opened it, because no man living in the flesh had the power of doing so; no one under the earth was found worthy to open it, because souls separated from their bodies do not have such powers. No one but our Lord could open up the hidden meanings of the sacred word. Since, then, no one under the earth was found worthy to unseal the book, I see no reason why we should not believe that hell is under the earth.

PETER

(45) Is there one kind of fire in hell, or are we to believe that there are many fires, varying in kind according to the types of sinners?

43 Cf. Ps. 85.13.
44 Apoc. 5.4.

GREGORY

There is one kind of fire in hell, but it does not torment all the sinners in the same way, for each one feels its torments according to his degree of guilt. Just as in this world many live under the one sun, yet not all feel the heat of the sun to the same degree—some feel it more, others less—so in hell there are many degrees of burning in the one fire. There is no need of different types of fire to produce different types of burning, either in this world under the one sun or in hell in the torments of one fire.

PETER

(46) Surely we do not hold that those who are once plunged into hell will burn there forever?

GREGORY

We most certainly do! And that truth stands solid and unshaken. Just as the joys of heaven will never cease, so, too, there is no end to the torments of the damned. For Christ says, 'And these shall pass on to eternal punishment and the just to eternal life.'[45] Since the promise He made is true, there is no reason to suppose that His threat will prove false.

PETER

What if someone should say: God has merely threatened sinners with eternal punishment to keep them from committing sins?

45 Matt. 25.46.

GREGORY

If He makes use of empty threats to keep us from injustice, then the promises He makes to lead us to justice are likewise worthless. But no one in his right mind would entertain such a thought. If God threatened us without ever intending to fulfill His threat, we should have to call Him deceitful instead of merciful. And that would be sacrilegious.

PETER

I should like to know whether it is just to inflct an everlasting punishment for a fault which is finite.

GREGORY

Your objection would be valid if the supreme Judge were to consider only the deeds men perform without looking into their hearts. To be sure, the sin that a wicked man commits comes to an end when he dies. But, would he not be willing to live on endlessly, if that were possible, in order to continue sinning? By not leaving off sinning during his lifetime, he shows his desire to continue in sin forever. The full justice of the Judge, therefore, demands that the wicked, who never wished to be rid of sin during life, should never be without punishment in eternity.

PETER

But a just man does not thrive on cruelty; he has his offending servants punished in order to correct them. The

chastisement serves to bring them to better ways. But the wicked condemned to the fires of hell will never correct their wickedness. To what purpose, then, do they burn in hell forever?

GREGORY

Almighty God, being a God of love, does not gratify His anger by torturing wretched sinners. However, since He is a God of justice, the punishment of the wicked cannot satisfy Him even if it continues eternally. All the wicked condemned to hell are being punished for their wickedness, to be sure. Yet there is another reason why they burn, namely, that the elect may see in God all the joys they experience, and may see in the damned all the tortures they escaped. Seeing the terrible punishment for sins which they avoided with God's help, they become all the more conscious of the eternal debt of gratitude they owe God for the graces they received.

PETER

But why are they called saints if they do not pray for their enemies whom they see in torments? Were not the words 'Pray for your enemies,' addressed especially to them?[46]

GREGORY

They pray for their enemies at a time when the hearts

46 Cf. Matt. 5.44.

of their enemies can still produce fruits of repentance and through penance gain salvation. What better prayer could we say for our enemies than that proposed by St. Paul. 'It may be,' he says, 'that God will enable them to repent, and acknowledge the truth; so they will recover their senses, and shake off the snare by which the devil, till now, has held them prisoners to his will.'[47] And how shall one pray for one's enemies when these can no longer repent of their evil ways and turn to works of righteousness?

The saints in heaven, therefore, do not offer prayers for the damned in hell for the same reason that we do not pray for the Devil and his angels. Nor do saintly men on earth pray for deceased infidels and godless people. And why? Because they do not wish to waste their prayers in the sight of a just God by offering them for souls who are known to be condemned. But if the saints, while still alive and conscious of their own failings, have no compassion on the unjust sinners in hell, if they show no compassion whatever at a time when they realize that their own sins and imperfections are worthy of God's punishment, how much more severely will they look upon the torments of the damned once they are freed from sin and corruption and stand near to their eternal Judge, closely united with Him? In their intimate association with the most just of all judges, the force of His severity will penetrate their minds, and they will be utterly displeased with anything that is out of harmony with the least detail of the eternal law.

47 2 Tim. 2.25,26.

PETER

(47) I have nothing to say in answer to this clear reasoning. But another question now disturbs my mind. How can a soul be called immortal when, as a matter of fact, it dies in the eternal fire?

GREGORY

Since life is defined in two ways, death ought also be considered from two points of view. To live in God is one form of life; to live simply as created beings is another. The former consists in living a life of happiness; the latter, in merely being alive. The soul can therefore be considered mortal and immortal: mortal, because it can lose its life of happiness; immortal, because it will never cease to live the life it was created to live; and this life is not destroyed even when the soul is condemned to eternal death. Under such a sentence it loses its life of happiness but retains its existence. Therefore, it is continually forced to suffer death without dying, to waste away without ever ceasing to be, to come to an end endlessly. And so, its death is undying, its ceasing is ceaseless, and its ending is without end.

PETER

At the hour of death, who is there who would not stand in dread of this inexplicable sentence of damnation, no matter what his life may have been? For, even if he is conscious of what he did, he still does not know how minutely his deeds will be judged.

GREGORY

(48) It is just as you say. Generally, however, the very dread that grips a departing soul is sufficient to purify it of its minor faults. You have often heard me tell about a saintly man who suffered terrible fear at the hour of his death, and how after his death he appeared to his followers in a white robe and told them of the wonderful welcome he had received.

(49) Sometimes, God strengthens timid souls with timely revelations in order to keep them from all fear at the moment of death. For example, there was a monk by the name of Anthony who lived with me in my monastery. He spent his days in tears, looking forward to the joys of his heavenly home. With the greatest devotion and spiritual longing he would meditate on sacred Scripture, not looking for words of wisdom, but for tears of compunction, in order to stir his soul to greater fervor. He would leave the world behind and rise in contemplation to the heights of God's heavenly kingdom. One night, he was told in a vision to prepare himself to leave on a journey, because God had ordered it. When he said that he did not have the money to pay for the fare, he received the answer, 'If you are referring to your sins, know that they are forgiven.' Since he was moved with fear and trembling after this first vision, he was again admonished in the same way the next night. Then, after five days, he took sick and died, accompanied by the prayers and tears of his brethren.

Merulus, also a monk of this monastery, frequently gave way to tears and devoted himself generously to almsdeeds. His lips were always moving in prayer, for he constantly

recited the psalms, hardly ever ceasing, except during meal-times and the hours of sleep. He, too, had a vision at night, in which a garland of white flowers appeared to come down from heaven and rest on his head. Shortly after, he took sick and died a very peaceful and happy death. Fourteen years later, when Peter, the present abbot of my monastery, wished to prepare a grave for himself next to Merulus' resting place, he noticed that the air was heavy with a fragrance rising from the tomb. It was as if the perfume of every flower had been stored there. This manifestation proved that the vision of flowers had been real.

John, another monk of this monastery, was a very gifted young man. He was endowed beyond his years with understanding, humility, meekness, and gravity. During a severe sickness which brought him to death's door, an old man appeared to him in a vision at night, touched him with his staff, and said, 'Arise. This sickness shall not be the cause of your death. But be prepared, for you have not long to live in this world.' Though the doctors had despaired of his life, he suddenly became well and soon regained his strength. He told others about the vision, and for a period of two years he devoted himself to God's service with a zeal indicative of maturer years, as I already said.

Three years ago, one of the monks died, and we buried him in the cemetery belonging to the monastery. As we were leaving the cemetery, John remained behind. After we had left, as he afterwards told us with fear and trembling he heard the brother who had just died calling to him from the grave. The aftermath proved that this was true, for ten days later he took sick with a fever and died.

PETER

(50) I should like to know whether we need to take these nightly visions seriously.

GREGORY

It is important to realize, Peter, that dreams come to the soul in six ways. They are generated either by a full stomach or by an empty one, or by illusions, or by our thoughts combined with illusions, or by revelations, or by our thoughts combined with revelations. The first two ways we all know from personal experience. The other four we find mentioned in the Bible. If dreams did not frequently come from the illusions of the Devil, the wise man surely would not have said, 'For dreams have led many astray, and those who believed in them have perished,' or, 'You shall not divine nor observe dreams.'[48] From these words we can readily gather how detestible dreams are, seeing that they are put into a class with divination. And if, at times, dreams did not proceed from our thoughts as well as from diabolical illusions, the wise man would not have said dreams come with many cares.[49] And if dreams did not arise at times from the mystery of a revelation, Joseph would not have seen himself in a dream preferred to his brethren, nor would the angel have warned the spouse of Mary to take the child and flee into Egypt. Again, if at times dreams did not proceed from the thoughts in our minds as well as from revelation, the

48 Sirach 34.7; Lev. 19.26 (Douay).
49 Cf. Eccle. 5.2.

Prophet Daniel, in interpreting the dream of Nabuchodonosor, would not have started on the basis of a thought, saying, 'Thou, O king, didst begin to think in thy bed what should come to pass hereafter: and he that reveals mysteries showed thee what shall come to pass.' And a little later, 'Thou O king, sawest, and behold there was as it were a great statue: this statue, which was great and high, tall of stature, stood before thee,'[50] and so on. Daniel, therefore, in reverently indicating that the dream was to be fulfilled and in telling from what thoughts it arose, shows clearly that dreams often rise from our thoughts and from revelation.

Seeing, then, that dreams may arise from such a variety of causes, one ought to be very reluctant to put one's faith in them, since it is hard to tell from what source they come. The saints, however, can distinguish true revelations from the voices and images of illusions through an inner sensitivity. They can always recognize when they receive communications from the good Spirit and when they are face to face with illusions. If the mind is not on its guard againt these, it will be entangled in countless vanities by the master of deceit, who is clever enought to foretell many things that are true in order finally to capture the soul by but one falsehood.

(51) This happened recently to one of our men who believed strongly in dreams. In one of them he was promised a long life. After collecting a large sum of money to last him for many years, he died very suddenly, leaving all of his wealth behind untouched, without having so much as a single good work to take with him.

50 Dan. 2.29,31.

PETER

(52) I remember the man. But may I ask you to complete what we began. Should we consider burial in church of any help to the souls of the dead?

GREGORY

Those not burdened with mortal sin benefit from being buried in church because, whenever their friends and relatives come to church, they see the burial place and are reminded to pray to God for their dear ones. Those who die in the state of mortal sin do not obtain pardon by being buried in church; instead, they incur an even worse condemnation. I can bring this point out more clearly by telling you of an event that took place in our own lifetime.

(53) Felix, the saintly Bishop of Ostia, was born and raised in the province of Sabina. He told me of a nun in that province who kept her chastity conscientiously, but with her tongue freely indulged in every kind of vain and foolish talk. After death, she was buried in church. The night after her burial, the sacristan of that church saw her in a vision being led to the altar and cut in two; one part was then burned in fire, while the other remained intact. The next morning he told the brethren about it and took them to the place where it happened. They found the marble floor in front of the altar blackened by fire as though the nun had actually been burned there. The incident shows clearly that burial in a church will not help the unforgiven sinner to escape judgment in the tribunal of the eternal Judge.

(54) John, a man of high rank, served as Perfect of Rome and was well known for his honesty and sincerity. He is my witness for the following incident. When the patrician Valerian of Brescia died, the local bishop was induced to accept a bribe and reserve a burial place for him in church. Valerian, however, up to a decrepit old age had led a life of sin and luxury, and stubbornly refused to change his evil ways at the end. The night he was buried, the blessed martyr Faustinus, in whose church the body lay, appeared to the sacristan and said, 'Go, tell the bishop to throw out the stinking flesh he buried here. If he does not do so, he himself will die in thirty days.'

The sacristan was afraid to tell the bishop. Even after a second warning he could not bring himself to deliver the message. The evening of the thirtieth day the bishop retired as usual in good health. During the night he met with a sudden, unexpected death.

(55) My witnesses for the story of an incident that took place in Genoa are the saintly Venantius, at present Bishop of Luni, and Liberius, a man of high rank and honest character. They know the circumstances of this incident from their servants who were present when it happened. According to them, Valentine, the defender of the Church at Milan, was an extremely dissolute man given over to every kind of frivolity. When he died, he was buried in the Church of St. Syrus the Confessor. At midnight, a commotion was heard in the church as though someone was being forcibly cast out. The sacristans came running to see what was wrong and found that two vile-looking spirits had bound Valentine's

feet and were dragging him out of the church, while he kept shouting and railing at them. Terrified at the sight, the sacristans returned to their beds. In the morning, on opening the tomb where Valentine had been laid, they found it empty. Looking around outside the church to see what might have happened to the body, they found it lying in another grave, the feet bound as they had seen them during the night.

Learn from this, Peter, that, if one dies in the state of mortal sin and arranges to have himself buried in church, he is sure to be condemned for his presumption. The holy place will not win him forgiveness, but will add to his guilt the sin of rashness.

(56) There is another incident which took place here in Rome to which the dyers of the city will bear me witness. The most outstanding craftsman among them died, and his wife had him buried in the Church of St. Januarius the Martyr, near the gate of St. Lawrence. The next night the sacristan heard his spirit shouting from the burial place, 'I burn! I burn!' When the shouting continued, the sacristan informed the dead man's wife, who immediately sent fellow craftsmen to examine the grave and find out the reason for the shouting. On opening it, they found all his clothes there untouched (and they have been kept in the church ever since as a witness to this event), but there was not a trace of his body. Seeing that not even his body was allowed to rest in church, we can judge to what punishment his soul was condemned. What benefit, then, can be gained by being buried in a church, if the unworthy are cast out of the sacred places through the power of God?

PETER

(57) Is there anything at all that can possibly benefit souls after death?

GREGORY

The holy Sacrifice of Christ, our saving Victim, brings great benefits to souls even after death, provided their sins can be pardoned in the life to come. For this reason the souls of the dead sometimes beg to have Masses offered for them.

Bishop Felix, whom I mentioned above, said that he had been told of such a case by a saintly priest who was still living two years ago in the diocese of Centum Cellae a pastor of the Church of St. John in Tauriana. This priest used to bathe in the hot springs of Tauriana whenever his health required. One day, as he entered the baths, he found a stranger there who showed himself most helpful in every way possible, by unlatching his shoes, taking care of his clothes and furnishing him towels after the hot bath.

After several experiences of this kind, the priest said to himself: 'It would not do for me to appear ungrateful to this man who is so devoted in his kind services to me. I must reward him in some way.' So one day he took along two crown-shaped loaves of bread to give him.

When he arrived at the place, the man was already waiting for him and rendered the same services he had before. After the bath, when the priest was again fully dressed and ready to leave, he offered the man the present of bread, asking him kindly to accept it as a blessing, for it was offered a

a token of charity. But the man sighed mournfully and said, 'Why do you give it to me, Father? That bread is holy and I cannot eat it. I who stand before you was once the owner of this place. It is because of my sins that I was sent back here as a servant. If you wish to do something for me, then offer this bread to almighty God, and so make intercession for me, a sinner. When you come back and do not find me here, you will know that your prayers have been heard.' With these words he disappeared, thus showing that he was a spirit disguised as a man. The priest spent the entire week in prayer and tearful supplications, offering Mass for him daily. When he returned to the bath, the man was no longer to be found. This incident points out the great benefits souls derive from the Sacrifice of the Mass. Because of these benefits the dead ask us, the living, to have Masses offered for them, and even show us by signs that it was through the Mass that they were pardoned.

I must not forget to add an incident that occurred in my monastery three years ago. There was a monk by the name of Justus, well versed in medicine, who attended to my needs while I was in the monastery and watched at my bedside during my frequent illnesses. When he himself became seriously ill, he was placed under the care of his brother Copiosus, who at present is practicing medicine here in Rome. Realizing that his final hour had come, Justus told his brother that he had kept three gold pieces hidden away for himself. This fact surely could not be concealed from the brethren. In making a careful search of the entire store of drugs, they came upon the gold pieces hidden away in a supply of medicine.

As soon as I found out that a monk living in community

with us had committed this evil, I was very much disturbed. The rule of our monastery had always been that the brethren observe the common life strictly. No individual was to have anything whatever as his own. Sadly disappointed, I began to consider what to do in order to free the dying man of his guilt and give the living a salutary lesson. Sending for Pretiosus, the prior of the monastery, I said, 'See to it that none of the brethren visits the dying man or speaks any words of comfort to him. When Justus in his dying moments calls for any of the brethren, let his own brother Copiosus inform him that the brethren will have nothing to do with him because of the three gold pieces in his possession. The bitterness of this experience at the moment of death may serve as a penitential scourge to cleanse him from the sin he has committed. After his death, do not bury him with the brethren, but, instead, cast his body into a grave dug in a manure pile. And as you throw the gold pieces into the grave after him, have all the brethren say together, "Take your money with you to perdition." So shall he be buried.'

Of these two commands, one was meant to benefit the dying man, the other to instruct the living. The bitterness at the hour of death was to bring about the forgiveness of his sin, and the harsh condemnation of avarice was to deter the others from ever yielding to this vice. It had the desired effect. For when the monk came to die and anxiously tried to commend himself to the brethren, none of them would listen to him or speak to him. When Copiosus explained to his dying brother the reason for this treatment, he began to weep bitterly for his sin and so passed away in a state of sincere contrition.

He was buried as I had commanded. Frightened by this

severe sentence, the brethren began one by one to bring back to me the smallest and most trifling articles, even such as the Rule allowed them to keep. They were very much afraid of retaining anything that might bring censure upon them.

Thirty days later, I began to feel strong compassion for the deceased Justus. As I considered with deep anguish the penalty he was enduring, I thought of a way to relieve him of his suffering. With this in mind, I called Pretiosus, the prior, and said to him sadly, 'Justus has now been suffering the torments of fire for a long time and we must show him our charity by helping as much as we can to gain his release. Beginning today, offer the holy Sacrifice for his soul for thirty consecutive days. Not one of these days is to pass without a Mass being celebrated for his release.' The prior obediently accepted the instructions and left.

Days passed, and being busy with other affairs, I lost count of them. Then, one night, Justus appeared to his brother Copiosus, who asked him at once why he came and how he was. 'Up to this moment I was in misery,' he said, 'but now I am well, because this morning I was admitted to communion.'

Copiosus hurried to tell the monks the good news. Taking exact count of the days, they discovered that this was the thirtieth consecutive day on which Mass had been offered for him. Previous to this, Copiosus did not know that the brethren were offering Masses for Justus, nor did the brethren know that Copiosus had seen him in a vision. At the very moment, therefore, when they became mutually aware of what had taken place, they realized that the vision and the completion of the thirty Masses occurred at one and the

same time. They were now convinced that the brother who had died was freed from punishment through the Sacrifice of the Mass.

PETER

The things I hear are marvelous and most delightful.

GREGORY

(58) The experiences of living persons strengthen our faith in the words of the dead. There was a very saintly man by the name of Cassius, Bishop of Narni, who offered Mass every day. During the celebration of the sacred mysteries he would give way to bitter weeping. One day, he received a command from God through one of his priests who had a vision. In this vision the following message was given for Cassius: 'Do what you are about, and continue at your work. Let not your foot rest nor your hand be idle. On the feast of the Apostles you will come to me and I will give you the reward for your labor.' Seven years later, on the feast of the Apostles, after celebrating Mass and receiving Holy Communion, he departed from this life.

(59) There is another incident I would like to add. I once heard of a man who had been taken captive and put in chains. His wife had Masses offered from him on certain days. When the man returned home after many years he described to his wife the days on which he had been released from chains. She instantly recalled that these were the days on which she had Mass offered for him.

The following incident, which occurred seven years ago also confirms our belief. Agatho, Bishop of Palermo, was

commanded to come to Rome by my predecessor of happy memory. On the way, as I am told by trustworthy and saintly men, he encountered a severe storm, which left him without any hope of escape. Varaca, his boatman, who is at present a cleric in the church at Palermo, was guiding the small boat that was towed by the ship. Suddenly the towline broke, and the boatman was lost in the wild waves.

The bishop himself, after enduring many dangers, finally reached the island of Ustica, with his ship severely damaged by the sea. For three days he searched for his boatman, scanning the surface of the sea in every direction. At last, in grief and sorrow, he had to give him up for dead. But he did the one thing charity cannot refuse—he had the Sacrifice of Christ our saving Victim offered to God for the deliverance of his soul. After this offering, when the ship had been repaired, he continued on his way to Italy. Coming to the port of Rome, he found his boatman whom he had given up for dead. Overjoyed and wishing to know everything that had happened, he asked how he had been able to survive the terrible dangers of the sea. The boatman described how he had been tossed about on the wild waves in his skiff, at one time forced to swim with the boat full of water; at another, left to sit on the keel with the boat turned upside down. This had continued day and night until his strength gave way under the double strain of exhaustion and hunger. At this point, as he still affirms at the present day, it was God in His mercy who came to the rescue. 'While I was fighting the waves,' he said, 'and quickly losing ground, I felt a pressure on my mind which put me into a semi-conscious state. Then someone appeared to me out there on the waves and gave me bread to eat, restoring my

strength immediately. Not long after, a ship sailing by picked me up and brought me to land.' When the bishop asked on what day this happend, he found out that the boatman was saved the very day the holy Sacrifice had been offered for him by the priest on the island of Ustica.

PETER

I heard the same story when I was in Sicily.

GREGORY

I believe that in these instances miracles were openly performed for living persons who were unaware of the source of their benefits, in order that all those who offer the holy Sacrifice, without adverting to its efficacy, might come to understand that deceased persons, too, can be absolved from sins through the Mass, provided their sins are pardonable. But remember, the benefits of the holy Sacrifice are only for those who by their good lives have merited the grace of receiving help from the good deeds others perform in their behalf.

(60) The safer course, naturally, is to do for ourselves during life what we hope others will do for us after death. It is better to make one's exit a free man than to seek liberty after one is in chains. We should, therefore, despise this world with all our hearts as though its glory were already spent, and offer our sacrifice of tears to God each day as we immolate His sacred Flesh and Blood. This Sacrifice alone has the power of saving the soul from eternal death, for it presents to us mystically the death of the only-begotten

Son. Though He is now risen from the dead and dies no more, and 'death has no more power over him,'[51] yet, living in Himself immortal and incorruptible, He is again immolated for us in the mystery of the holy Sacrifice. Where His Body is eaten, there His Flesh is distributed among the people for their salvation. His Blood no longer stains the hands of the godless, but flows into the hearts of His faithful followers. See, then, how august the Sacrifice that is offered for us, ever reproducing in itself the passion of the only-begotten Son for the remission of our sins. For, who of the faithful can have any doubt that at the moment of the immolation, at the sound of the priest's voice, the heavens stand open and choirs of angels are present at the mystery of Jesus Christ. There at the altar the lowliest is united with the most subline, earth is joined to heaven, the visible and invisible somehow merge into one.

(61) We need to sacrifice ourselves to God in a sincere immolation of the heart whenever we offer Mass, because we who celebrate the mysteries of the Lord's passion ought to imitate what we are enacting. The Sacrifice will truly be offered to God for us when we present ourselves as the victim. Even after the time of prayer, we must strive with God's grace to preserve a strong, earnest recollection, as far as that is possible; otherwise, trifling cares will dissipate the soul's vigor. Vain pleasures, too, will creep into the mind and fill it with the din of frivolous thoughts, thus robbing the soul of all the advantages of compunction. It was as a reward for her steadfastness that Anna obtained her request, for, after her tears, she remained in the same firm, constant state of mind. For that reason it is written of her, 'and her

51 Rom. 6.9.

countenance was no more changed.'[52] It was because she kept the intention of her prayer always before her that she received the gift for which she prayed.

(62) Let us also remember that we are justified in asking forgiveness of our sins only if we have previously forgiven those who have wronged us. The offering will not be accepted unless discord is first removed from the heart, as Christ says, 'If thou art bringing thy gift, then, before the altar, and rememberest there that thy brother has some ground of complaint against thee, leave thy gift lying there before the altar, and go home; be reconciled with thy brother first, and then come back to offer thy gift.'[53] Since all sins are forgiven by the offering of a gift, the gravity of the sin of discord becomes apparent when we see that no gift will be accepted for it. We are therefore obliged to go to our neighbor in spirit, no matter how far removed or separated from us he may be, and in spirit bow down before him and through our humility and good will be reconciled with him. Then the Creator, seeing our good disposition, will accept our gift, and in so doing free us from sin. From Christ's own statement we learn that the servant who owed 10,000 talents was cleared of his debt because he repented. But because he refused to forgive his own fellow servant a debt of 100 pieces of silver,[54] he was shortly after ordered to pay in full the debt which had just been canceled.

This parable shows us that, if we do not sincerely forgive injuries, we shall have to give a second account of the sins for which we have already done penance and experienced

52 1 Kings 1.18.
53 Matt. 5.23,24.
54 Cf. Matt. 18.24-35.

the joy of forgiveness. So, while we are enjoying days of grace, while our Judge holds off the sentence, and the Examiner of our sins awaits our conversion, let us soften our hardened hearts with tears and practice charity and kindness toward our neighbor. Then we can be sure that, if we offered ourselves during life as victims to God, we will not need to have the saving Victim offered for us after death.

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